

## Military spending millions to buy up — and preserve — land around Utah's Camp Williams



(Francisco Kjiolseth | Tribune file photo) Over the past decade, residential development has grown increasingly close to Utah National Guard's Camp Williams, pictured in the foreground with Saratoga Springs in the distance.



By Brian Maffly

Published: May 6

• Updated: May 06, 2020

Not long after Mormon pioneers settled in the Salt Lake Valley in the 1840s and '50s, the U.S. Army sent troops to Utah to assert control over the territory recently acquired from Mexico.

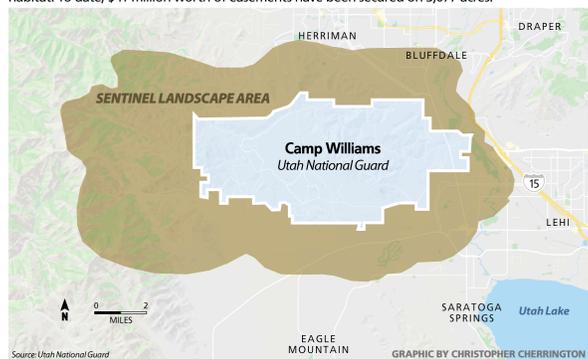
The soldiers honed their shooting and artillery skills 30 miles south of Salt Lake City in the West Traverse hills, terrain that later became Camp Williams, straddling the line between Salt Lake and Utah counties. For decades, this area was comfortably far from homes and businesses as Camp Williams' mission evolved toward combat training, the kind of action that doesn't mesh with urban land uses.

Agricultural fields and big game winter range along the installation's perimeter are now filling with neighborhoods, putting public safety and the Utah National Guard mission at risk.

This suburban sprawl has spurred commanders to embark on an ambitious private-land conservation campaign, resulting in the preservation of recreational access and open spaces in places that could otherwise become neighborhoods. Since 2012, the Department of Defense and partner agencies have invested \$41 million to acquire conservation easements on 3,077 acres of pastures and undeveloped lands inside what is known as the West Traverse Sentinel Landscape, a buffer zone around the 23,000-acre camp.

#### West Traverse Sentinel Landscape

The U.S. military, with state and local partners, is buying conservation easements on thousands of acres surrounding Camp Williams, the Utah National Guard training installation on the line between Salt Lake and Utah counties. Two years ago, the Utah Legislature designated the West Traverse Sentinel Landscape to help base commanders secure federal money to buy the easements, which keep agricultural land in production and maintain open space for recreation and wildlife habitat. To date, \$41 million worth of easements have been secured on 3,077 acres.



(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

“Because of the terrain, we get a lot of other agencies that come and train, including active-duty personnel, Navy SEALs, the FBI, local law enforcement. It’s a real gem as far as training,” said Brig. Gen. Tyler Smith, who was commander of Camp Williams when the program started.

By shielding the surrounding private land from development, the Guard not only secures military interests, but also enhances Salt Lake and Utah counties’ quality of life and natural environment, he said. Smith envisions a 37-mile, nonmotorized trail crossing these easements and encircling Camp Williams someday. Herriman has already built eight miles of trail on land conserved in part under the program called Army Compatible Use Buffer, or ACUB.

“It’s really a win-win scenario,” Smith said. “The installation wins because it ensures compatible use surroundings its borders, and the community wins because it provides recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat.”

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

NEWSLETTERS

## ‘Significant open land’

More than a third of land now encumbered with easements around Camp Williams was set aside in the form of donated development rights by the property owners, according to Paul Raymond, the Utah National Guard's ACUB program manager.

Among those farming families who gave up some of their land’s value without full compensation were descendants of Grant Smith. They recently completed a third conservation deal — for \$7.8 million — with the Guard.

The property owners are no relation to Brig. Gen. Smith, who has since been promoted to assistant adjutant general with the Utah Joint Force Headquarters.

In the third deal, announced last week, federal agencies and Utah officials paid for easements on 408 acres of the Smiths’ land west of Eagle Mountain, according to the Conservation Fund, a nonprofit that put the transfer together.

“This has been a multiyear project, and we are very appreciative for the way our partners tirelessly worked through the challenges,” landowner Jim Smith said. "Now, in perpetuity, there is an open land buffer for the training at Camp Williams, as well as a space that our children and grandchildren can enjoy as the rest of this valley fills in with housing. I am confident that these buffer areas could be the only significant open land in this area in the future.”

Most of the money came through the Defense Department’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration program, while the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service put up \$1.9 million, and Utah kicked in \$344,000.

Ration easement shows that agricultural values, environmental benefits, and military missions go hand in hand," said Emily Fife, the service's state conservationist.

[SUBSCRIBE](#) [DONATE](#) [NEWSLETTERS](#)

"Through our wonderful partnerships, we can find that common ground and develop solutions to accomplish so many benefits for this great nation."

This was the first easement secured near Camp Williams since the Utah Legislature established the West Traverse Sentinel Landscape at the Guard's urging in 2018. It was also among its most costly, weighing in at about \$19,000 an acre.

Establishing this conservation zone is critical to securing federal funds for future easements, according to Brig. Gen. Smith.

"We are competing for dollars with other military installations," he said. "What makes us more competitive is the state passed the landscape bill and appropriated money into the account. That demonstrates a partnership. The program manager likes to see other people with skin in the game."

## Rising prices

Camp Williams has prioritized acquiring easements on another 8,000 acres, mostly near firing ranges, but they will not come cheap.

To date, \$329 million in federal money has been spent nationally since 2012 to acquire easements on 224,000 acres in seven "sentinel landscapes" around military bases, not including the new one in Utah, according to the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership. Also going into these efforts was \$91 million in state, \$13 million in local, and \$59 million in private funds.

The Utah National Guard has identified 11,000 acres around Camp Williams it wants to preserve from development. Conservation deals have now been nailed down on more than a quarter of those lands. The priority lands for future deals about firing

ranges near Saratoga Springs, Herriman and Cedar Fort.

But each deal gets more costly on a per-acre basis than the last. This is because the land, sitting in a scenic setting near a growing metropolis, gets more desirable every year.

“The escalation in prices is indicative of what’s going on around the camp. The more houses are getting backed up against the camp and the more commercial development, the more the land values go up,” said Mike Ford, the Conservation Fund’s Southwest director. “Open space and trails are amenities that make an abundance of sense, but if we don’t deal with it now, they will be lost forever.”

When President Woodrow Wilson set aside a seven-mile stretch of the Traverse Mountains for Army maneuvers, the year was 1914, the United States was preparing to enter the war raging across Europe, and the Salt Lake and Utah valleys were covered in farms with a few smelters along the Jordan River and herds of mule deer roaming the foothills.

The intervening century has brought profound and permanent changes to how people use the land, highlighting the importance of planning for the future. Few thought to buy up development rights when they were cheap. With residential development closing in on Camp Williams’ firing ranges, the government has little choice but to pay private property owners to keep their land open in both senses of the word.

“You can still enjoy the beauty and explore the space around Camp Williams,” Brig. Gen. Smith said. “People come to Utah because they want that outdoor experience. They don’t want urban development everywhere you look.”



[bmaffly@sltrib.com](mailto:bmaffly@sltrib.com)

 Follow @brianmaffly

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#)