

## ENVIRONMENT

# This military program aims to protect land. Millions of Indiana acres are involved.

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A new project to help strengthen military readiness in Indiana also happens to be one of the biggest conservation projects in the state's history.

Indiana has been selected for a federal program that seeks to prevent incompatible land use around military facilities. The program does this by providing private landowners with resources to protect and preserve the land around the bases. This could take the form of reforestation, sustainable farming or safeguarding wetlands.

The program is called Sentinel Landscapes and will focus on land around two major Southern Indiana military installations.

Naval Support Activity Crane, the third largest U.S. Navy installation in the world, is located near Bloomington. And just forty miles south of Indianapolis sits Camp Atterbury, an Indiana National Guard training site.

There are only 10 such sentinel landscapes across the country, including the new southern Indiana project announced on Tuesday. It encompasses more than 3.5 million acres — the size of Connecticut — spanning from Vincennes to Edinburgh to Madison.

“It’s no exaggeration that the Sentinel Landscape is one of the biggest conservation projects in Indiana’s history,” said Christian Freitag, executive director of the Conservation Law Center and a professor of law at Indiana University. “It’s an example of how conservation can be an across-the-board win when the right partners work toward common ground.”

At the state level, key partners include Freitag’s Law Center, The Nature Conservancy, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, the Indiana Economic Development

Corporation's Defense Development Office, and numerous other local and state conservation groups.

These partners went through a yearlong application process to be part of the project and learned late last month they had been selected.

The designation means millions of dollars will be coming Indiana's way. It will help farmers, foresters and others sustainably manage their land to best support military operations.

## **Nature is a good neighbor**

Within Indiana's sentinel landscape, roughly 335,000 of the 3.5 million acres are currently protected. It contains six state parks, seven state forests, nine state fish and wildlife areas, dozens of nature preserves, the Hoosier National Forest and three national wildlife refuges.

But that means roughly 3.2 million acres are privately owned and can be maximized to buffer defense facilities, according to the sentinel program.

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Partnering with private landowners has been a key part of the program in the other landscapes around the country, including in Minnesota, Florida, North Carolina, Washington, Arizona, Georgia and Maryland.

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is a federal program that began in 2013 and is a joint venture between the U.S. Departments of Defense, Agriculture and Interior. Since then, the program has worked with private landowners to permanently protect more than 467,000 acres and implement sustainable management practices on an additional 2.3 million acres around military areas.

These efforts have preserved wildlife habitat, bolstered agricultural and forestry production and reduced land-use conflicts, according to the government.

There are many different types of encroachment, particularly rural and urban development, that can hamper the military's ability to carry out its training and testing mission. Those land uses can obstruct air routes and communications, compete with data frequencies, deplete water supplies or request changes in operations because of noise concerns, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

“It’s about buffering defense bases with types of land that aren’t incompatible to the work that they are doing,” Freitag said. “Nature is a good neighbor to them.”

There are four military installations within Indiana’s sentinel landscape: NSA Crane, Atterbury Muscatatuck Training Center, the Lake Glendora Test Facility and the Indiana Air Range Complex. These facilities all provide a variety of testing and training for Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and the National Guard.

## **Forests, farming and floodplains**

While the primary objective of the project is to preserve and protect military mission readiness, operations, testing and training, the program will also support agricultural and forest lands, promote watershed protections and ensure protections of threatened species.

“This program was put together to buffer,” Freitag said, “but they figured while they were doing that, they also thought about what do we care about: wildlife, working the land, waterways, etc.”

Much of the land surrounding the Indiana landscape military sites is forested or agricultural. Within the first five years as a sentinel landscape, roughly 70,000 acres of Indiana land are targeted for various conservation initiatives.

One of the first involves more than 20,000 acres and aims to enhance forestland management through reforestation in some areas, regenerating stands of oak and hickory trees and removing invasive species.

Sustainable forestry and invasive species removal decrease the likelihood of wildfires during drought conditions, while reforestation increases floodwater storage during heavy storms. Those steps reduce threats to military bases, but they're also good for the environment. Maintaining and connecting healthy forests will provide much needed habitat for federally endangered and threatened species including the Indiana bat, northern long-eared bat, hellbender salamander and migratory songbirds.

The potential benefits don’t stop there.

Another initiative includes protecting sensitive floodplains and wetlands corridors as well as promoting best agricultural practices across more than 30,000 acres. Those practices will reduce fertilizer runoff and keep clean water more plentiful. That's good for both the military bases and plants and animals in the area.

The efforts will also benefit surrounding communities by providing protection from flooding, which is increasing in recent years with more frequent and severe downpours. These areas will also increase public access to recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, hiking and bird watching.

“This designation ensures we continue to protect Southern Indiana’s beautiful landscape and at the same preserve our nation’s critical military mission here at home,” said Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb in a statement. “Indiana’s proud to do both, enhancing national security and our state’s natural resources.”

## **Money to make it happen**

The designation comes with money to back up the plans.

Between 2012 and 2019, more than \$141 million from the Department of Defense, \$223 million from the Department of Agriculture, \$41 million from the Department of Interior, \$169 million from states and \$95 million from state and local funds have supported projects across sentinel landscapes.

Now some of that federal money will be coming to Indiana and landowners from the region to help make these conservation efforts happen. It is unclear at this time how much money the state will receive.

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It’s not brand new money, Freitag said, but existing federal money that will get prioritized to Indiana and the other sentinel landscapes.

Program partners connect landowners with voluntary state and federal assistance programs that provide tax reductions, agricultural loans, technical aid, educational opportunities and funding for conservation easements. By aligning these programs, "government agencies use taxpayer dollars more efficiently and accomplish more on the ground with fewer resources," according to the sentinel landscape site.

The Department of Defense said it is proud to support the growth of the sentinel landscapes program and add Indiana to the list, along with two other new sites in Florida and Texas.

“These new landscape designations will leverage DoD funding and programs to protect the missions at 14 key DoD installations and ranges, protecting essential testing and training operations, enhancing resilience to climate change and preserving our nation’s natural

resources and working lands,” said Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Real Property Ron Tickle in a statement.

With the designation now official, state and local groups will begin working with federal agencies to sort out details and hire a program coordinator to help manage the project. The first of the initiatives is expected to be rolled out by late summer.

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