



Sierra Vista City Manager and chair of the Cochise Conservation & Recharge Network Chuck Potucek discussing the conservation projects that will be funded through the Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program. July 2022
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In a partnership committed to preserving the environment and natural water resources along the San Pedro River, Fort Huachuca and the City of Sierra Vista secured \$2.8 million dollars from the Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program.

"(REPI) is a program designed to help military installations around the country deal with some of the environmental issues that they have to deal with," said City of Sierra Vista Manager and the chair of the Cochise Conservation and Recharge Network, Chuck Potucek. "And then, there's a group formed called Sentinel Landscapes that brings people together to identify for these projects. So, they're the actual ones who are responsible for applying for the grant through the Department of Defense."

The REPI grant is a nationwide grant program that awards military installations with funds to preserve the undeveloped land that surrounds facilities. This year's REPI challenge awarded a total of \$31.6 million to finance nine conservation projects around the nation. Fort Huachuca was one of two recipients in Arizona to receive REPI funds.

"This type of grant helps those other parties able to get conservation easements in order to help protect the boundaries around the base — basically, help us have a nice barrier between the base and any development," said Ryan Fitzpatrick, a hydrologist on the Environmental and Natural Resources staff on Fort Huachuca. "At the same time, it also helps preclude development in and around the Fort's boundaries."

“The other work will definitely be beneficial to the aquifers — hopefully, allow more water to get into the aquifer,” Fitzpatrick continued. “These types of projects certainly benefit the aquifer — at the same time — is allowing us to hopefully positively affect anything that we see from climate change.”

Fitzpatrick said that in general, the REPI grant will also help finance projects to prevent further erosion issues.

“A lot of it is gabion baskets in streams, basically to not allow a stream to entrench or move a head cut,” said Fitzpatrick. “A head cut is where you have a nice stream and it drops down really quick and that head cut would propagate up the watershed — basically cause more erosion. And so, you start getting these big, large cuts and rills. So basically, those gabion baskets will stop, slow the water there so we don’t have that.”

Fort Huachuca was awarded \$2.8 million from the REPI grant on June 22. Most of the funds will finance the completion of the Coyote Wash Stormwater Recharge project, according to Potucek.

Potucek said that the project is designed to capture some of the urban enhanced runoff (UER) to recharge the aquifer and will require \$1.5 million dollars of the REPI grant to complete. He said that he hopes the project will be complete by the end of 2023.

“The goal of the projects is to promote near stream recharge of either treated effluent — such as what we do at the city’s environmental operations park — or use flood control Urban Enhanced Runoff to try to meter the water near to the river, so that storm waters can then recharge nearest to the river and help flows in that ways,” said Potucek.

Fort Huachuca Media Relations Officer Tanja Linton said that the funds from the REPI grant are critical for protecting the environment that allows for specialized training for military personnel on Fort Huachuca.

“The terrain that Fort Huachuca encompasses allows us to conduct some unique missions and also to support some of our partners within the Department of Defense and some of our partners across the globe,” said Linton. “We have everything from the Thunderbirds — the Air Force Thunderbirds — coming in to do their training here. They loved our protected airspace that does not have commercial encroachment ... We had Navy Seals training here to certify for a mission that they were going to conduct.”

“If we didn’t protect the land that we operate on — if that mission failed — other missions would fail as well,” she continued. “So, making the environmental mission a priority for us here allows us to carry out the other important missions for the Department of Defense ... We sustain the land that we defend.”

The Cochise Conservation and Recharge Network (CCRN) is a partnership with the City of Sierra Vista, Fort Huachuca, and Cochise County that funnels resources towards developing water conservation easements, water recharge projects, and preserving the natural habitat in the area in partnership with the Congressionally recognized San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPRNCA).

“The Cochise Conservation and Recharge Network (is) primarily a subset of the Upper San Pedro Partnership that was really focused on the parties that had the responsibility to get things done and the accountability as well as the financial resources to participate in those efforts,” said Potucek. “Times have changed and that funding really through BLM (Bureau of Land Management) and the Department of The Interior, dried up so to speak, to use a pun. So, that created a gap in what we’re trying to achieve.”

Potucek said that CCRN was formed in 2015 to address that gap in financing environmental conservation projects led by the Upper San Pedro Partnership.

“The City of Sierra Vista was one of the founding members of the Upper San Pedro Partnership and it brought together 20 various local, state, and federal agencies as well as private sector entities and non-governmental organizations to work together to try and come up with potential projects and prescriptions that could assist us in preserving the SPRNCA,” said Potucek. “So, that has been going on since 1998.”

However, Potucek clarified that the Upper San Pedro Partnership and CCRN are not City of Sierra Vista organizations.

“(The) Upper San Pedro Partnership and CCRN are not city organizations,” said Potucek. “They’re groups that have been formed of which the city has been a part of through the years working with other partners to try to achieve the goals. Because no one entity can tackle a problem of this magnitude with the resources needed to get them done.”

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