

# 'Conservation win': County included in land-protection program

By **Ryan Trares** - March 5, 2022



*Land around Camp Atterbury, including Atterbury Fish and Wildlife Area and private land throughout southern Johnson County, is part of a 3.5 million acre area in Indiana included in the Sentinel Landscapes program. The program offers landowners the resources to maintain and preserve the land around those bases, whether that's from sustainable farming practices, wetland restoration or planting trees.*

**The land surrounding Camp Atterbury features a bounty of wild, wooded and workable land that defines southern Johnson County.**

Animals, including numerous endangered species, call the hilly forests, ponds, rivers and wetlands home. Bird watchers, fisherman, hikers and hunters flock to preserves and public land to take in the natural beauty.

At the same time, the forests are interrupted by robust farmland that speaks to county's agricultural tradition.

Now, private landowners in that area will have access to funding to ensure the land, whether used for agriculture, forestry, preservation or other uses, is protected.

A swath of southern Indiana — including almost half of Johnson County around and north of Camp Atterbury — was chosen to be part of a federal program aimed at conserving land around military bases. The Sentinel Landscapes program offers landowners the resources to maintain and preserve the land around those bases, whether that's from sustainable farming practices, wetland restoration or planting trees.

Indiana's inclusion in the program is a major victory for all residents of the state, said Christian Freitag, executive director of the Conservation Law Center at Indiana University.

"It's no exaggeration that the Sentinel Landscape is one of the biggest conservation projects in the history of Indiana," he said. "It's one of the largest conservation wins in Indiana history."

The Sentinel Landscapes program was created primarily to conserve and strengthen the land surrounding the country's military installations. A partnership between the Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior, the program works with private landowners to advance sustainable land management practices around military installations and ranges.

Sentinel Landscapes was founded in 2013 to strengthen military readiness by buffering military bases from encroachments such as residential development.

"To maintain their military readiness, they need to do training there," Freitag said. "If they have heavy residential development nearby, they're going to encounter complaints about that. And different bases, such as Atterbury and (Naval Support Activity) Crane, have their own water supplies. Heavy development upstream affects their ability to have clean water on base."

The program also aims to conserve natural resources, bolster agricultural and forestry economies, and increase climate change resilience.

"When they were putting together this program, their primary objective was to maintain military readiness for American security," Freitag said. "But they realized that as they're doing that mission, they can accomplish a number of other priorities of the government, such as maintaining working forests and working farms, and helping farmers stay on land."

Up until earlier this year, seven areas throughout the United States had been accepted into the program, in states such as Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina and Washington.

In February, program organizers announced three new additions: around Camp Bullis in Texas, across Northwest Florida, and across southern Indiana.

"These new landscape designations will leverage (Department of Defense) funding and programs to protect the missions at 14 key (Department of Defense) 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 Ron Tickle, deputy assistant secretary of defense for real property.

The southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape encompasses 3.5 million acres — a swath of land approximately the size of Connecticut.

That area is home to four Department of Defense installations: Camp Atterbury, part of the Atterbury-Muscatatuck Training Center; Naval Support Activity Crane near Bloomington; Lake Glendora Test Facility near New Lebanon and the Indiana Air Range Complex. Woven around and through those areas are six state parks, seven state forests, nine state fish and wildlife areas, 39 state-dedicated nature preserves, three National Wildlife Refuges and the Hoosier National Forest.

"It turns out nature is a good neighbor to the military," Freitag said.

The program aims to improve landscape resilience around military bases by maintaining and connecting healthy forests. At the same time, landowners around participating landscapes can address habitat needs of various native species. In Indiana, that includes the federally endangered Indiana bat and federally threatened northern long-eared bat.

Key partners in Indiana include the Conservation Law Center at Indiana University Maurer School of Law, the Nature Conservancy, Indiana Economic Development Corporation, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Indiana Defense Task Force and the White River Military Coordination Alliance.

Numerous local and state-level conservation organizations also worked together on Indiana's application to the program.

"Ensuring southern Indiana remains a safe haven for native species and conservation of natural lands is critical," said Larry Clemens, Indiana state director of the Nature Conservancy. "This designation gives us important private and public sector tools, and expands upon critical partnerships to protect lands, improve water quality, enhance climate resiliency, and preserve the beauty and splendor of Southern Indiana."

Though entrance in the program does not create any new sources of funding, it does give landowners in those Sentinel Landscapes areas priority to existing programs, such as those that help farmers protect wetlands or keep soil from eroding, Freitag said.

"This is not as though all of the sudden \$100 million falls from the sky and gets used to buy land. That is not the way it is set up," he said. "But now, for properties within that 3.5 million-acre area, the existing federal programs that are already out there and allocated in the federal budget, resources for private landowners, those lands are prioritized."

Resources for landowners within the new program can be found at the Sentinel Landscapes website.

"I expect this will be an injection of tens of millions of dollars that will now be available to southern Indiana private landowners that otherwise would not have been," Freitag said.

"This is a win for private landowners."

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### **Ryan Trares**

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