

# How the Military Works With Local Communities to Combat Climate Change

The Defense Department's Kristin Thomasgard on her work protecting the environment

## ARTICLE

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The Pew Charitable Trusts

To some, the U. S. Department of Defense (DoD) might be an unlikely player in the work to reduce the effects of climate change. But the military has a key role to play at the intersection of national security and conservation, which is where Kristin Thomasgard – the program director for the Defense Department’s Readiness and Environmental Protection

Integration Program—comes in. This interview with Thomasgard, from Pew's recent "[Ocean, People, Planet](#)" podcast series, has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: Tell us about your work at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on Maryland's Eastern Shore — and why the refuge, established in 1933 as a sanctuary for migrating birds, is so important to the military?**

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Courtesy of the subject

**A:** The Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, or BNWR, is in a key location beneath critical airspace used by the Department of the Navy to train pilots from the nearby Naval Air Station Patuxent River. Part of that training requires a very safe, quiet, and dark space, such as that offered by BNWR.

We're also testing expensive equipment and sensitive systems at NAS Patuxent River. So any kind of weather impact is significant. And having access to our runways and roadways matters.

## **Q: But your interest goes beyond BNWR, doesn't it?**

**A:** These challenges around BNWR are those that any community might face in getting people or equipment from one place to another and ensuring that we're not negatively impacting our ability to do the work that needs to be done.

Stewardship of important natural resources and waterways at all Department of Defense installations and ranges is critical. We're interested in maintaining those landscapes and

protecting those resources, and we also have a critical mission to accomplish. We need space that's safe and available to conduct testing, training, and operations.

We really think of our military installations and facilities as a part of the community in which they're located. We have facilities both within the Chesapeake Bay watershed and across the country that are severely impacted by a changing climate, environmental conditions, and extreme weather events. We've often looked at those issues as a risk management challenge that we must face and assess.

In addition, most of the folks who work at our facilities live in the surrounding area. People are central to the department's ability to accomplish our mission. We're part of the same overall ecosystem and dealing with the same effects.

## **Q: What do you think is unique about the work you've done around protecting the refuge?**

**A:** I think our relationship with BNWR is really an incredible example of a diverse set of partners that you wouldn't expect to come together; that's part of what makes it special and part of what helps it work. These partners have different reasons for wanting to protect the area, and they've joined in a common cause to preserve the refuge and the water and maintain the military mission. By bringing these diverse perspectives together, we can grow the sources of funding and the types of programs that are available. And I think when we talk about conservation in the context of mission protection and national security, it speaks to members of different political parties.

## **Q: So, in specifics, how has DoD engaged with the refuge?**

**A:** There's a significant federal, state, local, and private partnership effort called the Middle Chesapeake Sentinel Landscape—focused on multiple efforts, but especially on preserving historic agricultural lands that add to the conservation footprint around BNWR. We help to identify and acquire properties that are adjacent to BNWR or would contribute positively to the conservation objectives and habitat improvement at the refuge through the expansion of BNWR.

There are also several other ongoing efforts and partnerships focused on coastal resilience, such as exploring ways to re-establish natural habitats in the vicinity of our facilities—both where those natural habitats historically occurred and where they provide a nature-based solution for climate and extreme weather events. We've been working with several partners, including The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Nature Conservancy, Conservation Fund, and the state of Maryland.

## **Q: Beyond the Chesapeake Bay, how is the DoD working to protect more military installations from the impacts of climate change?**

**A:** There's growing importance within the DoD on combating climate change. We've seen significant funding increases for programs focused on building resilience for military installations and, more specifically, on nature-based solutions—and expanding our partnerships is a helpful part of that process. Through those efforts, we can identify and work closely with communities and organizations locally to advance shared goals and implement nature-based solutions as a key sustainability component.

*To listen to the full conversation on the impacts of climate change at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and the Chesapeake Bay, [find our full podcast episode here](#).*

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