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Unlocking Partnership, Opening Paths: Inside the REPI Program

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The Defense Department helps this Minnesota wolf defend its turf. (Photo by Julie DeJong, Minnesota DNR, via the US Army Flickr feed.)

IN BRIEF

WHAT DO MILITARY OFFICERS NEED that land trust directors can locate?

A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE in the lead protects sensitive land near bases by supporting conservation.

ITS IMPLEMENTERS ALSO MAKE RECREATION MORE REACHABLE, with projects to show for it in Minnesota, Montana and beyond.

When you think of the Department of Defense, do you think of conservation? You might start to consider the DoD as a unique partner in conservation after learning about the REPI program.



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REPI, short for Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration, is a tool used by the DoD to protect land around military bases. This protection became official in 2003. That year's **National Defense Authorization Act** codified the long-term goal of enhancing military operations by reducing land-use conflict.

This Act officially allowed the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force to partner with private conservation organizations to protect land near military installations. The program has rolled out across the United States, often in collaboration with land trusts for not only conservation but also the creation of new spaces for recreation. The U.S. Army's REPI work goes by the name Army Compatible Use Buffer, or ACUB. A representative partner is the **Prickly Pear Land Trust** (PPLT) based in Helena, Montana. The trust has applied ACUB funding twice, with upcoming projects in the works.

The Prickly Pear Land Trust was introduced to REPI funding through Fort Harrison, a training installation three miles west of Helena, Montana. Two parcels of land within the one-mile buffer around Fort Harrison were up for sale and already approved to be subdivided into residential homes. PPLT had concluded that this land needed to be protected and worked to secure funding from ACUB and the county to buy those properties. These spaces became two parks that provide access to the outdoors in a variety of ways. The first project, Tenmile Creek Park, has three miles of accessible trails to people of all abilities and provides commuter

routes to the state's only V.A. hospital.

Travis Vincent, Lands Project Coordinator at the Prickly Pear Land Trust, pointed out the value behind REPI as a funding source. "The REPI Program has been transformational," he said in an interview. "It gives us the ability to work on projects that otherwise don't have that kind of funding source."

PPLT's second project, the restoration of Sevenmile Creek, is on 358 acres including 2.2 miles of channelized stream. This work allowed PPLT to bring people together through different private funding sources for the restoration work as well as in-kind contributions from local water experts. This land is now used as an outdoor education classroom for local high schools and universities and provides important habitat for wildlife. "This restoration work brought the floodplain back to life," Vincent shared. "Local wildlife recovered, and birds started showing up - we saw 100 species of birds come back that year." (For evidence, take a look at Sevenmile Creek's [eBird website](#)).

Camp Ripley, Minnesota is recognized as a Sentinel Landscape, too. Its program involves DoD, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of the Interior with a wide remit for sustainable management practices on working lands. Todd Holman, the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Coordinator, works to convene these partners and more across a broad landscape. These partners, he says, derive motivation from the many benefits

from collaboration.

Holman frames those benefits as a two-part formula: “Threats to the military mission include incompatible land use such as residential encroachment, but also large scale conversion of natural resources. If significant land converts to something else other than the natural resources habitat, where do all of those species go? Whether species are threatened, endangered, or at-

risk, where do they go? If the installation would be the only refuge, that too could impact the training mission capabilities.”

An ecosystem logic applies, he continues. “That’s the idea of sentinel landscapes – to try and keep lands economically and ecologically viable. We focus our work on working lands and the partners that support working lands to keep farms farms and forests forests.”

Kent Wimmer is Defenders of Wildlife's Senior Northwest Florida Representative and coordinator for the newly designated Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape. He described the ways sentinel landscapes are helping increase recreational opportunities in Florida. “The lands that the Air Force wants to conserve essentially are the Florida Wildlife Corridor. [The space] overlaps where there are gaps in the Florida National Scenic Trail. If we’re successful through our **Sentinel Landscape** and can acquire some of these lands that are important to military missions or important for wildlife, we can also close some of the gaps in the

Florida National Scenic Trail.”

Partners in this effort - including the U.S. Forest Service and the Florida Trail Association - are working via this hiking route to provide public access to areas that are being conserved for recreation. Protecting the Florida Wildlife Corridor will also increase access to hunting and fishing - as well as public access to lands that have access points for state-designated paddle trails.

Sentinel landscapes also draw priority for grant funding or other assistance programs. Kent Wimmer commented on this benefit: “All those agencies have their own land conservation programs, but they thought, ‘How can we work together?’ and the best way, they figured out, was to designate areas and say ‘Yes, we will work together in this area. We’ll prioritize federal funding that comes up through our agencies, or goes out through our agencies, and we’ll work together through state agencies and the private sector to try and get more accomplished for conservation on the ground together with collaborative projects than we could separately.”

“**If we can acquire some of these lands, we can also close some of the gaps in the Florida National Scenic Trail**

There are many crucial benefits to protecting land near military installations: endangered species protection, habitat management, safer communities. As Andrea Silverman, Conservation Manager at the Prickly Pear Land Trust described: “[these] threats to installations can really undermine the ability of installations to function at the highest capacity.” These threats to

military operations and training are expansive and can include anything from light pollution affecting night-vision training to restrictions on military operations if nearby land development destroys or further fragments habitat, pushing endangered species onto military installations.

If land trusts are located near military training operations, they can consider approaching an installation about using REPI funding for conservation or recreation projects. REPI conservation partners are required to have an approved agreement with a military installation, and a representative at the installation must submit the application for REPI funding.

Projects must work to limit incompatible development near military installations or mitigate potential future environmental restrictions such as the Endangered Species Act. As of 2021, these projects also include enhancing resilience to climate change and severe weather events. Through FY 2021, the Department of Defense protected almost 830,000 acres of land, leveraging a total

of \$1.18 billion including partner contributions.

The REPI program achieves close to a 1:1 match between expenditures and partner contributions, with the support of over 500 partners across the United States. Since the beginning of this program, 47% of spending through REPI came through partner contributions. REPI is especially unique in that it is a federal grant program that can be matched with other federal funds such as the Natural Resources Conservation Services' Agricultural

Conservation Easement Program or the Forest Legacy Program through U.S. Forest Service, among other federal programs. States with larger populations may see priorities for funding, which may help explain why it took PPLT almost a decade to draw its REPI funds.

Turning back to Florida, Wimmer commented on how matching gains momentum. "The state of Florida and local governments are getting millions of dollars each year through the RESTORE Act, with funds from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill," he said. "That's a source of funds that can be used to match REPI dollars. The cool thing about REPI dollars is that they aren't counted, by law, as federal dollars so REPI dollars can be used to match other federal dollars."

If you are curious about the REPI program and want additional information, see the Department of Defense's **REPI Primer Series**.

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