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## Altamaha River conservation improves Fort Stewart military readiness

From staff reports  
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ATLANTA — The Conservation Fund, Fort Stewart-Hunter Army Airfield and the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust announced the protection of 3,800 acres along the Altamaha River that will preserve a corridor of undeveloped land within Fort Stewart’s Army Compatible Use Buffer.

A working forest conservation easement funded by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration program ensures that the property will remain protected from any development that could hinder training operations, while supporting sustainable timber harvesting and providing wildlife habitat, recreation and climate benefits.

“This conservation effort to ensure compatible land use on the borders of our installation is proof of the excellent relationship between Fort Stewart, The Conservation Fund, the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust and all of our southeastern Georgia neighbors,” Fort Stewart Garrison Commander Col. Manuel Ramirez said. “Protecting this swath of land is a benefit for the environment and a testament to our premiere power projection platform capability to provide our nation trained and ready forces.”

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“Protection of The Conservation Fund’s Beards Creek Forest will go a long way toward protecting Fort Stewart’s aerial maneuver corridors from encroachment,” Larry Carlile, Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield’s ACUB program manager, said. “Incompatible development is a real threat to the ability of many military installations to train to standard. Fortunately, we have strong partnerships here that ensure our borders and our neighbors’ adjacent lands are in harmony with the military mission. We could never have protected Beards Creek Forest without the support of REPI funds and funding provided by our partners.”

Urban sprawl and land conversion near installations create significant challenges for both the military and surrounding communities. Located southwest of Savannah, Fort Stewart faces ongoing risks from incompatible nearby development that could negatively impact the installation’s training and testing mission. By placing a conservation easement on the privately owned forestland, the partners are able to protect the land and create a buffer of open space near the installation while ensuring the protected land remains a productive and sustainable working forest.

The land is part of The Conservation Fund’s Beards Creek Forest, which the national nonprofit purchased for conservation and sustainable forest management in May 2021 through its Working Forest Fund using loans from the Richard King Mellon Foundation and the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority. Dedicated to mitigating climate change, strengthening rural economies and protecting natural ecosystems through permanent conservation, the Working Forest Fund has acquired more than 63,000 acres of at-risk working forests in Georgia.

“This effort is a great example of modern conservation,” Andrew Schock, the Georgia and Alabama state director at The Conservation Fund, said. “The easement protects the forest while it is sustainably managed for its timber resources and remains on the tax rolls. This win-win solution supports local jobs, preserves popular hunt club lands and helps ensure that our country’s military can operate without hinderance.”

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Beards Creek Forest also enhances protection for Georgia’s largest river — the Altamaha — and expands habitat restoration efforts in the southeast part of the state. Now, thanks to funding from REPI, roughly half of the forest landscape is permanently protected under a conservation easement held by the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, preserving its longleaf pine ecosystem and many wildlife species, including the gopher tortoise.

“Protection of the Beards Bluff property reflects the collaborative nature of large-scale land conservation,” Hal Robinson, director of legal affairs at the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, said. “The project involved multiple nonprofit partners and Fort Stewart, Georgia, as well as funding from REPI. The project supports sustainable forestry and the local economy while significantly increasing an existing conservation corridor. With this 3,800-acre addition now protected by a conservation easement held by the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, total protected land within the compatible use buffer surrounding Fort Stewart now exceeds 50,000 acres.”

Authorized by Congress, the REPI program supports cost-sharing partnerships between the military services, private conservation groups, and state and local governments to remove or avoid land-use conflicts near installations and address regulatory restrictions that inhibit military activities. The REPI program is annually funded by the U.S. Congress, with support from the delegation representing Fort Stewart: U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, U.S. Sen. the Rev. Raphael Warnock and U.S. Representative Buddy Carter.

“I will continue working with the Department of Defense to ensure military readiness and to responsibly steward Georgia’s natural resources,” Ossoff said. “I thank the leadership at Ft. Stewart-Hunter Army Airfield, The Conservation Fund, and the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust for their contributions to this effort.”

“As a son of Coastal Georgia, I appreciate the incredible beauty of the Altamaha River and the importance of our forestlands,” Warnock added. “And as a voice in the Senate for Georgia’s military bases, I understand the strategic importance of preserving this land to protect Fort Stewart’s aerial training mission. Today’s announcement is a victory for both our state’s ecosystem and our state’s role in military training. I applaud the partnership between Fort Stewart, The Conservation Fund and the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust that made today’s announcement possible. I look forward to continuing to support these mutually beneficial efforts in Washington.”

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To date, The Conservation Fund has protected nearly 40,000 acres and 68 miles of rivers and streams within the Altamaha River watershed — the second-largest in the volume of freshwater inflow to the Atlantic Ocean in the country. The fund is currently working to secure additional conservation easements on the remaining Beards Creek Forest land.

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Carlton Fletcher

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