



Sentinel Landscapes: A Novel Approach to Land Conservation

By Jennifer Schultz

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) operates more than 420 major military bases in the United States. While most were built in relatively isolated locations, the rapid pace of development in recent years has pushed communities closer to perimeter fences, jeopardizing the military's ability to operate effectively. [Incompatible development](#) around a military base can restrict access to training areas, present obstacles to aircraft, interfere with night training through light pollution, and degrade communication frequencies. It also consumes surrounding farmland and wildlife habitat.

In July 2013, federal agencies announced a new initiative to reduce the adverse effects of incompatible development. Known as the [Sentinel Landscapes Partnership](#), the aim is to sustain military readiness, preserve agricultural land and protect wildlife habitat by focusing on areas where these priorities overlap. Federal partners, including the DoD, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior, are working with states and the private sector to recognize landowners for practices that both benefit their operations and are compatible with the military's test and training mission.

The roughly [28 million acres](#) occupied by the nation's military bases are varied in terrain and climate to give forces a realistic training environment for combat and complex missions around the world. Military land also provides valuable habitat for a growing number of species seeking refuge from development in once rural areas. In fact, DoD lands are home to 425 plants and animals on the Endangered Species list, the [highest density of species](#) to receive such protection on property managed by a federal agency. While the DoD takes very seriously its [responsibilities](#) under the Endangered Species Act, managing its land in a way that both supports military readiness and imperiled species is challenging and costly.

Incompatible land uses that threaten the military mission also [endanger working lands](#)—farms, ranches and forests—which are vital to sustaining agricultural productivity, safeguarding natural resources and maintaining a rural way of life. Although states have implemented a wide variety of [programs to preserve working landscapes](#), the United States still [loses more than 1 million acres](#) of farmland to development each year.

Federal Action

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership gives the federal government and states an unparalleled opportunity to capitalize on the link between national defense, conservation and working lands. Preserving farms, ranches, forestlands and open space that surround military bases helps the people and wildlife that depend on them and also buffers bases from the kind of

Did You Know?

- Land managed by the U.S. Department of Defense contains a higher concentration of threatened and endangered species than any other federal land.
- More than 1 million acres of U.S. farmland are developed each year.
- The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is a unique collaboration between federal agencies to protect agricultural land, wildlife habitat and military training areas from incompatible development.

development that puts their testing and training activities at risk. Government agencies will begin by identifying working or natural lands that are strategically situated to protect the military mission from incompatible development. They will then offer [incentives](#) to encourage landowners to take steps to protect their land. A coordinating committee overseeing delivery of federal programs in support of Sentinel Landscapes had its first meeting in February 2014.

The [first designated Sentinel Landscape](#) is located in the South Puget Sound region of Washington State, the home of [Joint Base Lewis-McChord](#). At more than 415,000 acres, the base is the largest in the western United States and a [top employer](#) in the state. In addition to critical [military](#) operations, the region is also characterized by a unique [prairie](#) ecosystem, home to several [at-risk species](#). Today, only [3 percent](#) of the original prairie habitat remains, the majority of which is located on the base. Federal, state and local partners will protect and manage 2,600 acres of habitat outside the base, increasing the flexibility to use military land for required training.

The DoD and U.S. Forest Service [announced](#) a second Sentinel Landscape project in September 2013. The Forest Opportunities in Resource Conservation and Environmental Security partnership, known as FORCES, is an initiative of the Southern Group of State Foresters to encourage conservation of private forestland near military bases. Initial project areas include Florida's [Eglin Air Force Base](#) and North Carolina's [Camp LeJeune](#) and [Fort Bragg](#). The Forest Service and state forestry agencies have invested \$1 million in forestland around these key military bases. The [2014 Farm Bill](#) also promotes the relationship between military bases and forest conservation.

State Action

The effects of incompatible development on military activities, wildlife habitat and working lands are becoming increasingly apparent in many states. Although the federal government can provide valuable assistance, the ultimate responsibility for managing community growth and development rests with state and local governments. Steps taken by states, outlined below, can help minimize conflict over competing uses and support the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership.

Sustainment of Military Bases

- Create a military advisory body or commanders' council (32 states and Guam).
- Provide financial assistance to communities for projects that enhance the value of bases (11 states).
- Place restrictions on development around bases (10 states).

Habitat Protection

- Provide a tax credit to landowners who donate land for conservation (15 states).
- Designate land with important natural resources as an area of "critical state concern" (12 states).
- Provide funding to help state agencies buy conservation easements (10 states).

Farmland Preservation

- Establish a program to buy agricultural conservation easements (27 states).
- Establish a farm viability program.
- Incorporate development guidelines for agricultural areas into land use plans.

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[NCSL Military and Veterans' Affairs Webpage](#)

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