

Florida Panhandle air base, already nation's largest, looking for more space

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE — The 724 square miles of forests, swamps and beaches encompassed by Eglin Air Force Base make it the nation's largest air base, yet officials are worried about running out of room.

Future housing and commercial development might make it impossible for Eglin and other bases to continue using airspace over surrounding civilian areas for missions such as low-level training flights and weapons testing.

Eglin officials want to protect that airspace by blocking most development in a largely forested area of the Florida Panhandle 100 miles long and 10 miles wide. This flight path would extend east from Eglin and curve around Panama City to the Gulf of Mexico.

"People said, 'That's crazy. That's 1,000 square miles,'" said Jesse Borthwick, senior environmental scientist for Eglin's 46th Test Wing.

Crazy or not, the Northwest Florida Greenway - about the size of Rhode Island - is winning support from state officials, environmentalists and business interests. If formalized, the project would be the biggest of its kind ever undertaken by the Defense Department, and it would serve as a national model, Borthwick said.

"We see this as an ideal overlap of military and conservation interests," said Mollie Palmer, deputy chief of staff for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

The plan, with an estimated price tag of \$200 million to \$300 million, calls for the state and the federal governments to purchase some property, but mostly to obtain conservation easements - paying owners a relatively small amount not to develop their land. The easements would allow such uses as timber-growing and outdoor recreation.

State environmental officials and The Nature Conservancy, another greenway partner, also see it as a way to protect a unique habitat filled with rare and endangered plant and animal species. Those include the red cockaded woodpecker, black bear, bald eagle, gulf sturgeon, flatwood salamander, gopher frog, violet-flowered butterwort and the Panhandle lily.

The greenway would link Eglin, once itself a national forest, with the Apalachicola National Forest, St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and the state's Big Bend Wildlife Management Area.

The state also wants to purchase 16,652 acres of woodlands from International Paper Co. that would protect another military flight path on Eglin's west side. It would connect the base with the Blackwater River State Forest and Alabama's Conecuh National Forest.

That project, combined with the greenway, would result in a corridor of public and protected lands more than 200 miles long, including black bear migratory paths and key rest stops for migrating birds.

Bears, birds and other creatures also make Eglin their home, and the base has won numerous awards for protecting its environment. None of those conservation efforts has interfered with military missions, but that could change if surrounding development makes the base an "island of biodiversity," Borthwick said.

"Then the pressure's on us to be the stewards of the remaining critters," he said. "We don't mind carrying our fair share, but to expect the military to be the sole stewards of our flora and fauna is an unfair expectation and burden."

A law passed last year lets the military enter conservation partnerships such as the greenway, but no federal dollars have yet been allocated for it.

Gov. Jeb Bush and Victoria Tschinkle, The Nature Conservancy's Florida director and once the state's top environmental regulator, are among greenway supporters who have lobbied the Pentagon for a financial commitment. That would clear the way for a formal partnership including the state, the Air Force, the Nature Conservancy and the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council.

The Air Force is not used to paying for fly-over rights, and some military officials are leery about setting a precedent, Tschinkel said.

"But I think they're realizing more and more that a lot of areas where they've got a huge investment in bases are going to be threatened by development, and that they probably are going to have to come up with a new way to secure their future," she said.

Even without a formal agreement, the state is spending \$250,000 on greenway planning. It already has targeted two properties totaling about 60,000 acres for purchase from The St. Joe Co., Florida's largest private landowner, on the eastern end of the greenway.

The state is seeking easements for a couple parcels at the western end. The Nature Conservancy is negotiating all four projects for the state. Funding would come from the Florida Forever environmental lands program.

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