



## 2023 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation Award

Each year since 1962, the Secretary of Defense has honored installations, teams, and individuals for outstanding achievements in Department of Defense (DoD) environmental programs. These accomplishments include outstanding conservation activities, innovative environmental practices, and partnerships that improve quality of life and promote efficiencies without compromising DoD's mission success. The 2023 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards cycle encompasses an achievement period from October 1, 2020, through September 30, 2022 (Fiscal Years [FY] 2021-2022). A diverse panel of 54 judges with relevant expertise representing Federal and state agencies, academia, and the private sector evaluated all nominees to select one winner for each of the nine categories. These nine categories cover six subject areas including natural resources conservation, environmental quality, sustainability, environmental restoration, cultural resources management, and environmental excellence in weapon systems acquisition.

### About the Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation Award

The Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation award recognizes efforts to promote the conservation of natural resources, including the identification, protection, and restoration of biological resources and habitats; the sound management and use of the land and its resources; support of the military readiness mission; and the promotion of an ecosystem management perspective. Efforts may include preventing losses to threatened, endangered, and at-risk species; recovering species and their habitats; reducing bird/wildlife aircraft strike hazard incidents; proactively managing for wildfires; reducing and eradicating invasive species; and making landscapes more resilient to ensure access to realistic combat environments while protecting ecosystems and the species that live there. Large installations have more than 10,000 acres and can include leased, military-owned, or -administered outlying ranges or training practice areas. The 2023 winner of the Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation award is *Camp Ripley, Minnesota Army National Guard*.

### About Camp Ripley, Minnesota Army National Guard

Camp Ripley has long been recognized as one of the most ecologically pristine training sites in the nation, sustaining training for the Minnesota Army National Guard on 53,000 acres that also support more than 600 plant species, 233 migratory and resident bird species, 51 mammal species, and 23 reptile and amphibian species; incredible habitat diversity; and 18 miles of untouched Mississippi River frontage. Camp Ripley remains at the forefront of conservation practices while sustaining over 365,000 annual man-days of training. Among recent milestones accomplished at Camp Ripley is the restructuring and technological innovation of the forestry management program. Camp Ripley launched a new forestry viewer on its geographic information system platform, incorporating all past and present timber harvest data, native species, wildlife data, training requirements, and more, all developed in-house with ESRI tools. Camp Ripley has a particularly robust forestry-timber program that generates \$80,000 to \$90,000 each year to fund conservation while expanding training ranges as needed and improving ecological health. The training site has partnered with the National Defense Center for Energy and Environment to host a bat house structure research project; out of that project, a second opportunity arose for Camp Ripley to take part in an Environmental DNA (eDNA) study of turtles. This study enhances ongoing Blanding's turtle conservation efforts. The Natural Resources Conservation program also hosts an annual internship program with Central Lakes College (CLC) that provides students with experience conducting wildlife monitoring surveys and vegetation management.



*The training site completed construction of three new stormwater infiltration basins; these retention ponds will capture 95% of stormwater runoff in the cantonment, preventing sediment or other contaminants from reaching the Mississippi River adjacent to the post.*

## Major Accomplishments in FY 2021-2022

- Camp Ripley won a \$250,000 award in the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Challenge this year to establish resiliency corridors within the Sentinel Landscape footprint. Working with The Nature Conservancy and the University of Minnesota Duluth, Natural Resources Conservation staff mapped natural resources features identifying areas of resiliency that could aid in a regional response to climate change.
- The Integrated Training Area Management program repaired more than 500 acres of maneuver damage in the past two years and has maintained more than 1,000 acres of grasslands used for military training. This work was conducted with the seed collected on the installation.
- Camp Ripley maintains an annual interagency agreement with CLC for summer internships, with interns trained and licensed to apply herbicide treatments. The Land Rehabilitation and Maintenance coordinator oversees this program and creates the workplan for the interns. Through this program, more than 900 acres of invasive vegetation was treated in the past two years.
- The Natural Resources Conservation program manages around 14,000 acres of the installation with prescribed fire each year to reduce hazardous fuel loads; this program also supports ecological and training enhancement applications to promote jack pine and similar species. The Natural Resources Conservation program has also been working with neighboring landowners through the Sentinel Landscape program to enact burn regimes outside of the training site.
- The training site completed construction of three new stormwater infiltration basins. In conjunction with two already in place, these retention ponds will capture 95 percent of stormwater runoff in the cantonment, preventing sediment or other contaminants from reaching the Mississippi River adjacent to the post.
- The Camp Ripley Army Compatible Use Buffer program continues to thrive. Over the past two years, Camp Ripley acquired an 840-acre conservation parcel via fee title from the City of Baxter, using REPI funding and state conservation matching funds. The city contributed \$50,000 to write a management plan and create trails and greenspace abutting the Mississippi River in primary noise contours.
- Camp Ripley took part in an eDNA study of turtles. The installation monitors Blanding's turtles, a state-threatened species, using transmitters to track hatchlings and collect data on habitat use, survival rates, distances travelled, and more. Nests are also monitored each spring and protected from predators and traffic. The eDNA survey is enhancing these efforts, determining presence and absence of turtle species in Camp Ripley's waterways and ponds. With this information, the Natural Resources Conservation program will be even better positioned to identify and preserve habitat now in use by turtles.



*One goal for Camp Ripley has been the conservation and management of grassland communities for training while protecting the biological integrity of native plants.*



*Camp Ripley took part in an eDNA study of turtles. This study enhances ongoing efforts of Blanding's turtle conservation.*