

REPI Program Protects Atlantic Test Ranges from Urban Sprawl

Cooperative Conservation Prevents Encroachment of Test & Training Areas

THE NAVY'S ATLANTIC Test Range (ATR) has partnered with land conservation non-governmental organizations (NGO) to preserve land that will protect the mission while bringing benefit to the environment and local community.

Before 2004, Navy testers may have wondered if they could protect their mission while at the same time protect the environment and improve the quality of life for people living near their ranges. Thanks to the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI), such a scenario is now possible, and is playing out at the Navy's ATR. There, the Navy and its non-federal partners are ushering in a new era of cooperative conservation through REPI.

Located over the mid-Chesapeake Bay, the 2,360-square mile ATR inner range has been used since 1943 to conduct flight tests and training to ensure that military aircraft and their associated weapons systems perform to design and safety specifications before being delivered to the warfighter. Aircraft such as the F/A-18 Hornet, V-22 Osprey, and F-35 Lightning could not have been developed

without the full cradle-to-grave support services provided by the ATR.

The inherent risks associated with flight testing, as well as noise generated from aircraft, have been major drivers in the Navy's desire to limit population growth around the ATR. Historically, this has been accomplished by using Air Installation Compatible Use Zone (AICUZ) studies and working closely with community planners to avoid land development projects under critical test areas. These capabilities

expanded in 2004 when REPI was added to the Navy's "encroachment toolkit" to address incompatible development through cooperative conservation partnerships.

Launched under the Department of Defense Sustainable Ranges Initiative, REPI provides funding for the military to work with state and local governments, NGOs, and willing land owners to secure conservation easements that will help prevent encroachment of test and training areas. The easements allow landowners to maintain



Aerial view of the ATR complex.



A section of the Nanticoke River which closely borders many of the REPI project areas.

Nanticoke Watershed Alliance

REPI has proven to be an encroachment tool that provides permanent protection from incompatible development.

—Tony Parisi

ownership of their property as a farm, forest, or ranch but prevent future residential, commercial, or industrial development that could impact the ATR mission. “Before REPI, we relied solely on local government zoning entities to protect the mission from encroachment. Because zoning regulations can change or may not be compatible with operations, REPI has proven to be an encroachment tool that provides permanent protection from incompatible development,” said Tony Parisi, Head of the Naval Air Systems Command Ranges Sustainability Office (SO).

With REPI in its toolkit, the encroachment team from the SO, Naval Air Station (NAS) Patuxent River, Maryland and the Naval District Washington Community Planning Liaison Office reached out to land trusts, conservation organizations, and the

State of Maryland to establish a partnership to protect valuable open spaces and conserve habitat around the ATR. These efforts were rewarded when The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The Conservation Fund, and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) answered the call. The partnership was formally established by a Multi-Year Encroachment Protection Agreement that was signed by the Navy and its partners in September 2009. This signed agreement, which, among other things, stipulates cost-sharing arrangements among the partners (usually 50/50), gave the Navy and its partners the green light to start securing conservation easements on properties within the ATR Inner Range. “We look forward to working with the U.S. Navy through the REPI program,” said Maryland DNR Secretary John Griffin.

“The program presents a unique opportunity to implement Governor Martin O’Malley’s agricultural, ecological, and water quality goals for the Chesapeake Bay; support the continued viability of the Navy’s facilities; and stretch our conservation funds further. The Navy has a large impact on Maryland’s economy, and the REPI program is an excellent way to protect that investment and keep our State moving forward.”

The challenge to developing a successful REPI program is identifying land parcels whose protection is both critical to preserving the range mission and meeting the conservation goals of the partner. In the ATR, an area of intersection was identified on Maryland’s Eastern Shore along the Nanticoke River in the Nanticoke Rural Legacy Area (RLA). This RLA is part of a State of



An F-18 Green Hornet flies over NAS Patuxent River.



An F-35 Lightning soars in the skies over the ATR Inner Range.



MH-60 Seahawks fly over the Solomons Island bridge.

Maryland program that designates target areas for preservation using state rural legacy grant funds. In the case of the Nanticoke RLA, it is also located in the heart of the ATR restricted airspace.

When a REPI project begins, parcels of Navy interest and land preservation value are identified. The next step is to find a landowner that is willing to enter into a conservation agreement. This is where having energetic partners such as TNC and The Conservation Fund is critical. These partners have people on the ground that share a vested long-term interest in the target properties and have developed relationships with the property owners. “Communication and trust are keys to convincing a land owner that conserving their land is the right thing to do, from both a stewardship and a financial perspective. We have been lucky within the Nanticoke Region because of the community

connectedness, commitment to an agricultural lifestyle, and willingness to work with TNC and the Navy,” said Liz Zucker. Zucker and her counterparts at The Conservation Fund possess the local knowledge, state contacts, and years of practical experience in land conservation that is key in securing an easement.

Through the efforts of TNC, REPI funds have been used to support the purchase of conservation easements on four properties (670 acres total) in the Nanticoke River watershed. REPI funding has allowed TNC to close on more properties and nearly double the acres of area protected in the region. Close coordination among the Navy and its partners was an important factor in bringing these projects to closure.

Some of the aircraft that utilize the ATR Inner Range for tests or operations.



Swans are just one of the many species that call the Nanticoke River and surrounding waters home.
Nanticoke Watershed Alliance

These four properties are of significant value in protecting the region's environmental resources and controlling sprawl in the Nanticoke River watershed. The Nanticoke is one of the most ecologically significant watersheds in the Mid-Atlantic region due to its range of high-quality freshwater to brackish wetland communities and more than 270 rare plant and animal species. The watershed also provides internationally important habitat for migratory waterfowl and neotropical birds, and makes a significant contribution to the aquatic health of the Chesapeake Bay.

Because of its close proximity to the Washington, DC/Baltimore urban corridor and its attractive waterfront areas, the Nanticoke watershed is subject to sprawl development that threatens the ATR mission as well as the watershed's farms, forests and globally significant natural resources. Acquisition of easements on these REPI properties helps control sprawl by adding to the greenbelt of working farms and forests along the Nanticoke River, which in turn

creates a growth boundary around the rural village of Vienna. This innovative approach makes the Nanticoke RLA an outstanding model of comprehensive planning to prevent sprawl development.

Closer to home, the Navy is working with its partners to identify suitable REPI projects in St. Mary's County to limit urban growth in areas impacted by airfield operations at NAS Patuxent River and Outlying Field (OLF) Webster. The highest priority properties are those located near helicopter operating areas, runway approach and departure routes, and areas identified by the AICUZ studies as high noise or accident potential areas. Kitts Point, a 985-acre undeveloped property adjacent to OLF Webster, was approved for REPI funding in 2009. This property is strategically located to protect the unmanned aircraft testing and training that occurs at OLF Webster and the surrounding area. REPI funds were approved for this project, but ultimately Maryland DNR decided to acquire the property using its own funding. Nevertheless, the effort is considered a win for the Navy. The

Kitts Point land will remain undeveloped, thereby helping to preserve the OLF Webster mission. The approved REPI funds will remain in escrow for use on future projects.

Five new REPI projects totaling over 2,000 acres have been proposed for fiscal year 2012. The proposed properties will support a system of buffers and fill gaps in continuous tracts of land on the Maryland Eastern Shore near the Nanticoke and Wicomico Rivers and Quantico Creek. In addition, properties have been identified near the airfields at NAS Patuxent River and OLF Webster in St. Mary's County. The Navy will continue working with its partners to complete these new projects in the ongoing effort to protect the ATR mission at NAS Patuxent River. ↴

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