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A Unique Partnership Protects Defense Economy & Ecosystems

By Kay Rasmussen

THE NORTHWEST FLORIDA GREENWAY

With the growing needs of our population and our national security, the Northwest Florida Greenway is providing a very valuable and mutually beneficial answer to preventing encroachment. Encroachment can be defined as the act of entering gradually or silently upon the rights or possessions of another. Depending on your point of view, civilians (non-military) can view the Armed Forces as encroaching onto their housing and commercial developments and the military can view the civilians as encroaching into their land, air, and sea defense ranges. **The Northwest Florida Greenway is a beltway of encroachment protection for both military and non-military needs and values.**

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a unique partnership

PROTECTS DEFENSE ECONOMY & ECOSYSTEMS

By Kay Rasmussen



Photo Credit: TNC

Vast vibrant timberlands and ecosystems are preserved by drawing upon the skills of the entrepreneur, the power of the government and the passion of the individual, with all being directed by the knowledge of science.

Established in 2001 under the umbrella of a State of Florida Defense Infrastructure Grant, the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County, Florida (EDC), the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners, and Eglin Air Force Base gave birth to the Greenway. These three founding partners formulated the unique idea of this protective beltway in order to achieve many similar goals. This original 2001 \$75K state grant provided for a comprehensive assessment involving all related communities and counties in Northwest Florida, leading to common projects that benefit the region while improving the value of the Eglin range for future military missions. The Northwest Florida Greenway project was intended to protect and sustain existing military lands and airspace, support defense testing and training, promote continued targeted industry growth and business

retention, preserve environmental quality and biodiversity, maintain the economic viability of timber lands, and create additional recreational activities – **All** of this accomplished by protecting a corridor of undeveloped land.

The Defense Infrastructure Grant Program offered through the state of Florida provides funds to communities that host military installations through a grant application process. Considerations for a community to be a grant recipient include the ability to increase base efficiencies, dual-use opportunities with the civilian communities, economic impact, cost factors, and community involvement. This instrumental grant process was the basis that the three founding partners utilized to analyze and document the needs of Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field in regards to their missions and encroachment threats as well as the communities' needs for environmental protection and recreational activities.

The main objective of this comprehensive assessment was to identify the geographic area of interest (AOI) and assess the feasibility of establishing a buffering greenway. Northwest Florida is

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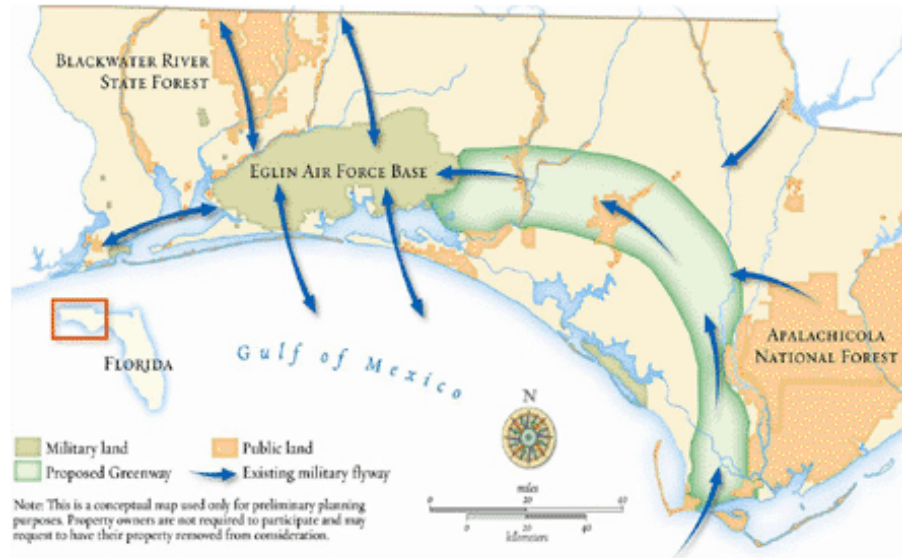
THE NORTHWEST FLORIDA GREENWAY

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most commonly known as being comprised of the 16 counties extending from Florida's western border with Alabama east into Jefferson County. To fully address options for achieving the desired greenway range expansion capabilities, it was necessary to extend the area of interest to include gulf coastal areas of three counties in Florida's "Big Bend" region: Taylor, Dixie, and Levy. The AOI definition was driven by three objectives: 1) buffer installation and land range boundaries to provide expanded geographical safety margins for operations conducted on the existing range, 2) preservation or expansion of existing corridors for access to and egress from all military ranges and airfields, and 3) establishment of new remote impact areas or corridors. Based on these three objectives, range expansion and buffering were determined to be feasible.

Despite being deemed feasible, the assessment discovered that although all parties involved were willing to explore ways to improve military buffering and environmental protection, the knowledge of the requirements varied. Additionally, there was no access to an integrated picture of the AOI and no single department or entity identified to address all of the requirements. It was recommended to establish a regional growth management identity to proactively address the requirements for current and future defense needs in Northwest Florida.

In 2003, after completing its comprehensive assessment, the Okaloosa EDC presented the idea of the Greenway to The Nature Conservancy, which then joined the project team. Now the four partners in the project team struck out to collaborate on proactively identifying common projects benefiting the region and improving the value of the military range missions by protecting and sustaining existing military lands and airspace, supporting defense testing and training, preserv-



The Northwest Florida Greenway footprint of the planned 750,000-acre conservation corridor.

ing environmental quality and biodiversity, maintaining the economic viability of timber lands, and creating additional recreational activities. The plan, with an estimated cost between \$200 million and \$300 million, was for the state and federal governments to buy property but mostly obtain conservation easements – paying owners a relatively small amount not to develop their land. The easements would allow for uses such as growing timber and outdoor recreation. The scope of work for the project team was protecting a contiguous corridor of undeveloped land between the Eglin Air Force Base Range and the Apalachicola National Forest, now known as the Northwest Florida Greenway – an unprecedented partnership making history.

With the assistance of multiple state of Florida awarded grants, the Northwest Florida Greenway has evolved into an unprecedented partnership of military, government, and non-profit organizations that will protect the military mission in Northwest Florida while enhancing the Panhandle's economy and conserving critical ecosystems in one of the most biologically diverse regions in the United States. This first comprehensive assessment developed the foundation that the Greenway still builds upon today.

PARTNERS

These four seemingly dissimilar partners have very similar interests. The Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County, Florida (EDC), is a not-for-profit public-private organization which exists to promote economic strength, diversity, and development. This includes the retention and expansion of existing industry as well as targeted industry recruiting. The military presence in Okaloosa County is the number one economic contributor. In a January 2008 Florida Defense Industry Economic Impact Analysis conducted by the University of West Florida's Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development, the military impact on Okaloosa County is measured to be just under \$7 billion annually.

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The economic viability of the region depends on the military. While other economic sectors may experience temporary downturns, the region's military installations continue to be the prime generators of the economy. There is a direct and indirect economic value resulting from this military presence. There is the active military personnel themselves, their spouses, and children; the civil service employees and their families; the retired and otherwise separated military personnel and their families; and there is the abundance of technical aerospace and aviation type businesses that have located in the county in order to engage in contracts with Eglin AFB and Hurlburt Field. It is because of this military presence and its economic contribution that the EDC focuses on the development of the technical, aviation and aerospace industry sectors in its mission for sustaining Okaloosa's business retention, growth, and prosperity.

As with many military installations, Eglin Air Force Base officials have been looking for ways to positively prevent encroachment onto their base from the neighboring towns and cities' development of adjacent land. Land development can also encroach into their planes' fly zones which are needed for military missions, testing, and training. The Department of Defense takes into consideration the private communities' safety when conducting military missions and a safety footprint, a safe zone, is required around the test area. Encroachment into their workspace could jeopardize their capabilities and success in providing our national security.

Eglin and Tyndall Air Force Bases, and Hurlburt and Whiting Fields are part of one of the nation's largest open-air military testing and training areas known as the Joint Gulf Range Complex. These northwest Florida military installations are all part of the Northwest Florida Greenway partnership. The Joint Gulf Range Complex has a strategic plan to maximize the capability of the unique air, land, and sea resources that exist in the Northwest Florida area through a collaboration of the various multi-service military installations strategically positioned there. Buffering or encroachment prevention is part of that plan.



The cost of not providing buffering is that both of Florida's military and ecological value could be seriously compromised. The footprint of the conservation corridor provides safe fly-space for the military planes.



Photo Credit TNC

The Eglin Air Force Base reservation is a vital resource for the military, Florida's economy and wildlife. Numerous endangered species find refuge in the Greenway's conservation corridor.

The Eglin land range consists of 724 square miles across three counties. In addition to serving as a location for conducting military missions, these ranges also contribute to the area's quality of life by providing recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and bicycling. Eglin AFB is a very successful steward of the environmental health and sustainment of plant and animal life on its land reservation. Following the 2005 BRAC Commission, Eglin AFB created its growth management plan *Vision 2015*. The idea behind Eglin's *Vision 2015* is *Together-We-Win*. In other words, Eglin AFB and the surrounding communities can accomplish more working together than working apart. Working together they both win; we all win; together we win. Incorporated into its *Vision 2015* is Eglin's plan for protecting its air, land, and sea buffering zones while simultaneously protecting environmental habitat and providing recreational activities, all supported by and encompassed in the Greenway's conceptual plan.

The Nature Conservancy has long recognized the preservation value of the land in Northwest Florida. With its immense biological diversity, the Panhandle of Florida is known as one of the last great wilderness spaces in Florida. The Nature Conservancy's mission is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. In order to fulfill the Greenway's environmental protection component, TNC serves as the Greenway's primary environmental steward.

NORTHWEST FLORIDA GREENWAY CHARTER

The Northwest Florida Greenway charter is to help identify and prioritize land preservation and conservation opportunities that will protect the land and air space corridors in the region. The goals of the project team include:

1. Strengthen the regional economy by sustaining the military presence and enabling defense contract awards with local civilian defense contractors, and enhancing tourism and recreational activities.
2. Promote the sustainability of the military missions in northwest Florida to meet national defense testing, and operational and training requirements as outlined in the Joint Gulf Range Strategic Plan.
3. Protect lands that will sustain the high biodiversity of the region, link protected natural areas, preserve water resources, and provide areas for outdoor recreation including the Florida National Scenic Trail.

MEMORANDUM OF PARTNERSHIP

In November 2003, a benchmark event occurred for this one-of-a-kind partnership. Then Florida Governor Jeb Bush, the United States Department of Defense, and The Nature Conservancy signed a groundbreaking Memorandum of Partnership to establish a 100-mile protected corridor spanning northwest Florida, connecting Eglin Air Force Base and the Apalachicola National Forest. This agreement reserved the first 7,597 acres of the planned 750,000-acre corridor.

"Florida is among the first in the nation to join forces with the Department of Defense to increase security for important military installations while at the same time protecting valuable natural resources." Governor Jeb Bush.

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

The July 1, 2004 Memorandum of Agreement, the first of its kind, was a second step to the November 2003 MOP and further united Florida's military and environmental missions. The Memorandum of Agreement allowed the participating parties the ability to protect the Northwest Florida Greenway and prevent incompatible development through acquisition of conservation easements in the corridor. The protection provided by this MOA would prevent development encroachment on military operations, protect the region's biodiversity and water resources, link existing protected areas, provide recreational opportunities, and help support the economic health of the region.

These historic Northwest Florida partnerships proved to the nation that we can have a strong national security and defense while protecting our natural environment. This federal, state, and local commitment to preserve 100 miles of open space linking the Apalachicola National Forest with Eglin Air Force Base recognizes common interests in safeguarding critical conservation lands and military air space.

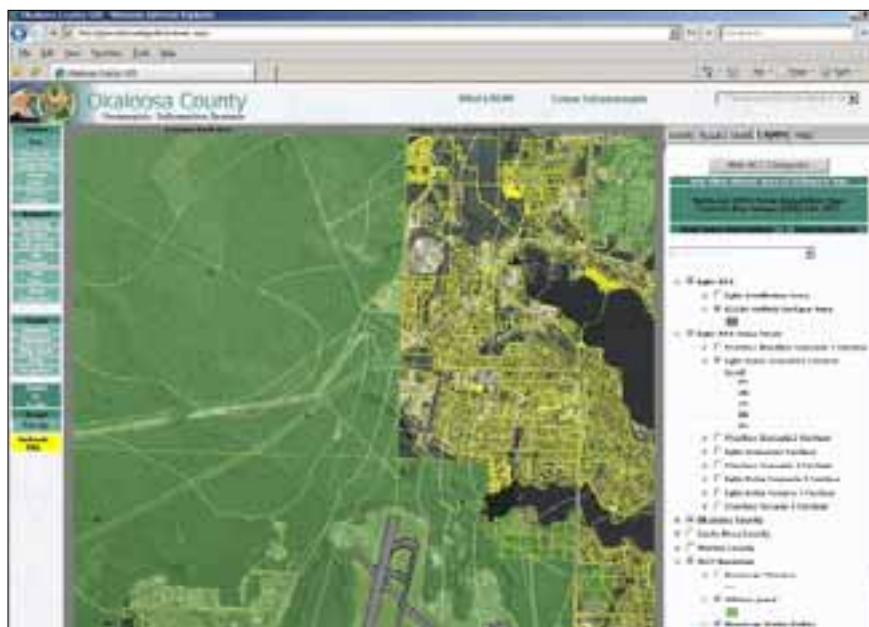
Following this MOA, President George Bush proposed \$20 million to support encroachment buffering efforts nation-

wide for the next fiscal year. In his budget message, the President mentioned the Northwest Florida Greenway as a model for the program.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Through the partners' dedication, more and more information was being disbursed on the multi-beneficial protection corridor through media sources, town hall meetings, and public sector forums. As a result of getting the word out on the Greenway's concept and intent, additional entities joined in the partnership process for this protection initiative. Joining the original founders and providing immeasurable strength in numbers were the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Forever, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Florida Department of Community Affairs, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Northwest Florida Water Management District, and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Forestry.

In 2005, a project advisory board comprised of representatives from these organizations was established to ensure efficient and effective completion of the objectives. The Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County, chair of the advisory board, engaged the University of West Florida's Haas Center to conduct a comprehensive assessment involving all related communities and counties in Northwest Florida to determine how they could participate on common projects that would benefit the region, while improving the value of the Eglin range for future missions. The EDC also engaged SimWright, Inc., an image processing and software development firm, in conjunction with the Okaloosa County GIS department to identify layers within the Greenway for conservation. A resultant data-



A state grant awarded to the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County provided funding to develop a multi-layered GIS database portal to monitor the lands within the Greenway's footprint.

Photo Credit Okaloosa EDC

base has been developed and resides with the Okaloosa County GIS department. Both of these supportive assessments were conducted based on the following tasks:

- Define the Air Force's geographic area of interest (AOI) relative to northwest Florida.
- Research Joint Gulf Range needs relative to sustaining and expanding current capabilities and translate into geo spatial accurate maps.
- Research the AOI to establish a baseline understanding of federal, regional, county, and local government entities and processes associated with use of land, water, and airspace, as well as private and public sector entities and processes associated with use of land, water, and airspace.

One of the main challenges throughout this seven-year process has been developing the thinking-outside-of-the-box concept and then educating and obtaining consensus on that concept. Small one-on-one meetings were held along with town forums and production of information materials.

- Develop databases (electronic and document repositories) associated with ownership and use of land, water, and airspace as well as major development activities such as new airports and housing complexes.
- Define requirements and action plan for implementing a shared Geographic Information System (GIS) that integrates all data needed to support implementation and sustainment of a regional approach to enhancing defense contribution to economic development.
- Assess feasibility of achieving the Air Force's desired enhancements to the Joint Gulf Range Complex. This includes options for creating new air corridors for access to land ranges and new impact areas both land and water.

RESULTS

One of the main challenges throughout this seven-year process has been developing the thinking-outside-of-the-box concept and then educating and obtaining consensus on that concept. Small one-on-one meetings were held along with town forums and production of information materials. Now with so many powerful partners supporting this remarkable initiative, the completion of that original vision to conserve a 750,000-acre corridor is on the horizon, hopefully within the next 5-10 years.

A database portal has been successfully developed by SimWright, Inc. through a contract with the Okaloosa EDC that allows leverage of multi-county GIS databases

and results of joint land use studies. This database resides with the Okaloosa County GIS Department and will support integrated growth management planning by the Air Force, local governments, and state agencies.

When the three original founding partners approached The Nature Conservancy with this buffering corridor concept, one of their objectives included TNC taking a proactive lead with the project. TNC's accomplishments have been especially important, given the hold on state funding due to budget restraints. Its efforts have contributed to the successful growth in federal funding and increased advocacy for the program. TNC was an active advocate for the Florida Forever Bill which was passed in 2008. This bill allocates \$300 million per year for conservation up through 2020, and will be utilized in part to complete the buffering corridor.

Another advocacy role that TNC took on was one of promoting and supporting the 2008 Defense Appropriation for the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI), which was authorized at \$46 million.



The Eglin land range consists of 724 acres across three counties and in addition to a location to conduct military missions these ranges also contribute to the area's quality of life by providing recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and bicycling.

As awareness of encroachment issues at military bases increases, the competition for these dollars will grow. The Conservancy will continue to support NW FL base applications for REPI funding and partnership support of those land acquisitions.

At the time of this article's publication, TNC was still heavily engaged in educational and outreach activities to include working with the Florida Defense Alliance, the U.S. Forest Service, Northwest Florida Transportation Corridor Authority, and 1000 Friends of Florida. TNC has also played a key role in outreach programs with

local governments and landowners throughout Northwest Florida in the areas of interest. This has included partnering with Eglin AFB and other military installations to host workshops focused on common interests of conservation and compatible use of land, sea, and air space.

Today, The Nature Conservancy continues to move forward with the state to complete the corridor's land acquisition and conservation easements. This includes utilization of grant military base buffering funds for land acquisition efforts, ecosystem management efforts, and partnership activities.

The unique partnership to protect the defense economy and ecosystems still has both challenges and opportunities ahead of it in order to complete the project. However, successful land acquisitions and private landowner donations have resulted in approximately one quarter of the 750,000 acres being preserved. Some of the lands within the boundaries of the Greenway corridor were already protected prior to this initiative. Some belonged to conservation owners and are considered safe from development, but still need protection in the case of

an impending sale. The acreage left to protect is a step-by-step process acquiring land as it becomes available.

Millions of dollars, countless man-hours, and endless passion and dedication are what make up this successful unique partnership among the military, environmentalists, and business and governmental leaders resulting in the first-ever collaboration for a beltway of defense economy and ecosystems encroachment protection, better known as the **Northwest Florida Greenway**. 

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