

News Release

No. 3136001 (Fort Indiantown Gap installation seals a partnership and begins a habitat restoration project)

By Adriane Miller

To the casual observer, the old Army landfill isn't much to look at. But to Shannon Henry, forest program manager with the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs at the Fort Indiantown Gap military installation, the retired landfill is a place of potential beauty, the perfect setting for acres of native grassland.

"Look, the warm-season grasses are already there," he says, pointing at tufts of little bluestem among the interloping strands of bluegrass. As if to punctuate the charm of the place, a noisy training helicopter flies directly overhead. Mr. Henry doesn't seem to notice—he's too busy imagining the spot transformed into a 25-acre grassland, part of a larger habitat restoration project he has helped launch at Fort Indiantown Gap.

Working closely with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Protection Agency, the installation at Fort Indiantown Gap near Harrisburg has begun a project to restore several acres of the Chesapeake Bay watershed within its borders to their natural state. In just two years, Mr. Henry said, the installation will restore seven miles of stream

buffer—known as riparian forest—plus five acres of wetlands and 25 acres of warm-season grasslands. Mr. Henry said the project's goal is to improve water quality in the tributaries located on the installation, control streamside erosion and sediment, and provide wildlife habitat.

The effort is being funded by a \$42,800 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Chesapeake Bay Habitat Restoration Challenge Program. With an additional \$65,200 in funds and in-kind services provided by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and the Pennsylvania Department of Military Affairs at Fort Indiantown Gap, the project has \$108,000 to invest in replanting and restoration.

The restoration project at the installation represents a major milestone for the U.S. Army and other federal agencies. They are committed to restoring 100 acres of wetlands each year beginning in 2000 and 200 miles of riparian forest buffer by 2010. The effort at Fort Indiantown Gap now will serve as a demonstration site for other restoration projects.

"It is a pleasure to take part in this special partnership that will be a model for conservation and restoration efforts across the Chesapeake Bay watershed," said Jolene E. Chinchilli, Pennsylvania executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "This partnership will help buffer the watershed, thus adding to its resilience and ultimately protecting the Chesapeake Bay."

Scott Anderson, director of development and communications for the Pennsylvania Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, said his organization's relationship with Fort Indiantown Gap is a good fit. "We do a lot of work with the installation, and we are delighted to be a part of this cooperative effort," he said.

"The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is committed to the long-term protection of habitat sites on Fort Indiantown Gap," said Major General William B. Lynch, adjutant general of the Pennsylvania National Guard. "We look forward to working with both The Nature Conservancy and Chesapeake Bay Foundation."

Open space, ready for planting

The installation has served as a military training facility since 1931. In 1998, as a result of Base Realignment and Closure activities, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania assumed control of the land from the federal government and converted it to a National Guard and Army Reserve training site.

Throughout its history, Fort Indiantown Gap has been used for military maneuvers, construction, and agriculture. Particularly in the early years of the 30-square-mile installation's operation, the heavily forested landscape was altered significantly.

Mr. Henry first discussed the feasibility of a restoration effort in 1998 with Jennifer Barto, Pennsylvania grassroots coordinator of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "It is something I always wanted to do here," he said. "These are all state lands. We have all this open space, and little chance it would be disturbed by training exercises," since those exercises conducted now by the National Guard and Reserve are limited to previously disturbed areas.

Ms. Barto was immediately interested. "We were anxious to work with a partner who could handle the financial aspect," she said, allowing the Foundation to focus on providing technical expertise and recruiting volunteers.

Mr. Henry and Ms. Barto asked The Nature Conservancy, already working at the installation on other projects, to become involved. Together, the three partners were convinced they could demonstrate to the EPA that they had all the elements of a successful habitat restoration project at Fort Indiantown Gap.

EPA agreed, and awarded the grant in October 1999. It provides funding for two phases of the project. Phase I began immediately, with site preparation, volunteer recruitment, and resource sampling already underway. By early spring 2000, project leaders and volunteers will begin planting and restoring forest stream buffers, and establishing a native warm-season grass plot to serve as a local seed source for future grass restoration projects. Also in the spring, initial construction activities related to restoring wetlands will begin, including earthmoving and grading.

Phase II of the project will consist of completing restoration of natural wetlands, reestablishing wetland plant species, establishing buffers for restored wetlands, completing restoration of riparian forest buffers, and continuing restoration of warm-season grasses.

The restored areas will be maintained by ecological burning, mowing, and invasive plant removal. They will be posted as restricted research and restoration areas and will not be open to military vehicle training.

The restoration effort is significant because of the area's location in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, said Ms. Chinchilli of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Fort Indiantown Gap lies within an area drained by tributary streams of the Susquehanna River, which contributes 50 percent of the Bay's freshwater, according to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Sediments, nutrients,

and toxic chemicals entering the tributaries eventually reach the Bay—but not if they are caught and filtered first by native grasses, riparian forest buffers and wetlands. Any effort to restore habitat in the watershed, Ms. Chinchilli said, has a positive effect on water quality of the tributaries, the Susquehanna, and the Bay.

It isn't just the quality of water and aquatic life that stand to benefit from the restoration project at Fort Indiantown Gap. Native animal species, including resident and migrating waterfowl and songbirds, native cold- and warm-water fish species, and grassland and forest mammals will see their habitats improve once native grasslands and wetlands are reintroduced.

All the plants need is an opportunity

To officially launch the restoration project in October 1999, project partners planted native trees and shrubs along a small creek running through the installation. The dogwood, sweet gum, and maple trees now join a group of other native saplings planted by middle school children just a year ago for another project. Already, other native grasses and shrubs have begun to grow near the older trees, entirely on their own. "We won't need to do a lot of planting," said Ms. Barto, pointing to the new, native growth. "This all just developed over the last year, when we stopped mowing."

All the plants need is an opportunity, she said. Native seeds survive for generations.

"Even after 100 years of impact, given the appropriate conditions, the seeds come back to life. This is a nice example of what can happen to nature when you leave it alone."

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