

APPENDIX F

FORT BENNINGS'S OFF-PROPERTY HABITAT PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT

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Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) Program

Perhaps the most promising program for lessening the environmental constraints on the Installation is the ACUB program. ACUB supports the Army's responsibility as a Federal agency to comply with all environmental regulations, including endangered species habitat protection. By working in partnership with conservation organizations, ACUB can coordinate habitat conservation planning at the ecosystem level to ensure that greater benefits are realized towards species and habitat recovery.

- Reduce training restrictions
- Meet Endangered Species Act recovery responsibilities
- Prevent development along installation boundaries
- Preclude the need to list future Threatened and Endangered species

In the face of increasing urban sprawl, Department of Defense (DoD) developed the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI), a multi-level effort designed to ensure the future use training land by addressing issues of potential encroachment on military training. Congress provides DoD with funding for compatible land use efforts under the Conservation Buffer Program. The REPI program was established as a way for DoD to implement the authority provided by Congress in Section 2684a of Title 10 United States Code which allows the Services to enter into agreements with private conservation organizations or with state and local governments. These agreements allow installations to cost-share the acquisition from willing sellers of land or interest in land by the partner in order to preserve high-quality habitat and limit incompatible development around installations. The Office of the Secretary of Defense oversees the program and allocates funding to the Services to help implement these projects.

The Army has implemented the REPI Program through its ACUB Program. The ACUB program represents a powerful tool and unique opportunity to work in partnership with state and local governments, and/or conservation groups to achieve a common goal of establishing buffer areas outside the installation boundary. This program allows the Army to work with partners to protect habitat and training land without using the lengthy and complicated acquisition process.

The overall management responsibility for the ACUB programs resides within the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management who also provides funding for

projects in addition to that received by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Proposals for Active Army Installations are validated by the Army Range Sustainment Integration Council and prioritized for funding by the Office of Deputy Chief of Staff G/3/5/7.

Fort Benning currently has an approved ACUB program, and with its ACUB partner The Nature Conservancy (TNC), is pursuing options for protecting land around its boundaries to be used as a buffer between military activities onsite and surrounding agricultural, residential or industrial land uses in the community and to assist Fort Benning in achieving its conservation goals. Projects completed or underway thus far include fee purchase of lands (to be sold to “conservation buyers” encumbered with a permanent conservation easement), purchase of conservation easements from existing landowners, and donations of conservation easements from existing landowners. In each case, the land transaction is undertaken by TNC using ACUB funding and some partner funding or in-kind assistance where possible (W. Harrison, TNC, pers. comm.).

There are no active RCW clusters near Fort Benning that are within the average RCW dispersal distance that can be counted as part of the Fort Benning RCW Primary Core recovery population. There is habitat adjacent to or near the Installation that could become RCW habitat capable of supporting RCWs which in the future could potentially be counted toward the Fort Benning RCW population goal.

TNC, through a cooperative agreement with Research, Development and Engineering Command, is responsible for the implementation of the program and received its first ACUB funding in 2006. TNC has already protected five parcels (comprising approximately 2,800 acres) through a variety of ACUB-compliant real estate transactions, and is negotiating to protect some 2,300 additional acres with several thousand more acres on the immediate horizon (W. Harrison, TNC, unpublished report). The ACUB program has the ability to secure significant quantities of habitat for RCWs and other protected species off-post.

In addition to ACUB, many other organizations and programs are actively conserving habitat in the Fort Benning area, including Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Georgia Department of Highways, The Conservation Fund, several land trusts and Forest Legacy.

The Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS) is a more regional initiative comprised of multiple agencies and organizations. One of the goals of

this initiative is restoring longleaf pine and increasing RCW populations across the Southeast, partially to lessen the recovery obligations of military installations. This long-term initiative could be valuable in protecting potential RCW habitat in the Fort Benning area.

The Army, SERPPAS, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, TNC and other organizations have a common interest in preserving undeveloped land in the Fort Benning area to increase the long-term stability of the Fort Benning Primary Core RCW Population. The logistics and details of this initiative, such as feasibility of landowner incentives for endangered species management on private lands, are currently being discussed amongst the above-listed organizations.