



*THE PARTNERSHIP: A collaboration of diverse federal, state, county, and local stakeholders with the goal of sustaining the Navy's mission near Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD while preserving the working and natural character of the land around the Chesapeake Bay.*

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## **Local Innovative Partnership Highlighted at National Forum**

Naval Air Station (NAS) Patuxent River, St. Mary's County, and Southern Maryland Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) were selected as one of six innovative partnerships to be showcased at the Association of Defense Communities (ADC) Installation Innovation Forum 2017 – a national forum held in San Antonio, Texas in February.

The forum theme was *Community-Military Partnerships that Focus on Military Readiness*. Representatives from St. Mary's County, RC&D, and NAS Patuxent River shared how leveraging innovative community-military partnerships in southern Maryland is helping to sustain military readiness and protect rural and natural resources. Efforts today to protect NAS Patuxent River and the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division's (NAWCAD) Atlantic Test Ranges (ATR), a special use airspace of 1.5 million acres that straddles the Chesapeake Bay, rely on support from a multitude of local, state and federal partners whose aims extend beyond maintaining access to the test ranges to conserving agricultural lands and preserving sensitive habitats.

The partnership was cultivated when in 1997 the state of Maryland created the Rural Legacy Program — an effort to protect property vulnerable to development that can weaken an area's natural resources. St. Mary's County, MD, began to take a closer look at ways to protect its rural landscape. In 2006, the state designated the 13,700-acre Mattapani Rural Legacy Area south of the base along the Chesapeake Bay, spurring the county to purchase an easement on a small parcel with county funds. Easements allow willing landowners to maintain ownership of their property as a farm or forest and provide compensation to prevent future development as identified in the terms of the agreement.

Recognizing that the goals of protecting the base and test range dovetailed with the aim of helping farmers preserve their land and way of life, the Navy and the county entered into a partnership agreement for encroachment protection. The Navy, through the DOD's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program, can provide the county with an additional source of funding to augment its own.

The REPI program allows the military services to partner with state and local governments and conservation groups to protect military operations and conserve natural landscapes. The REPI program has become critical to local efforts to support the base and test range. The county works with Southern Maryland Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) and the Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust (PTLT) — which also acts as local land trusts — to identify parcels, with interested and willing landowners, in the Mattapani Rural Legacy Area that, if developed, could threaten the missions at NAS Patuxent River. Together, the partnership has preserved over 1,700 acres in St. Mary's County.

All of the partners working to protect NAS Pax River and ATR — the Navy, the county, the state, and local conservation organizations — say financial support from the REPI program is critical to reaching their goals. "Without the REPI funds, there is no way this program could be successful; it actually would jeopardize the sustainability of NAS Pax River," said Cindy Greb, the Executive Director of RC&D.

Of course, the other funding sources are key as well. State funds, for example, can be applied to incidental planning costs — including appraisals, boundary surveys, and environmental site assessments — which can approach \$40,000 per transaction, Greb said.

Coordinating the acquisition of an easement involving multiple partners, though, creates challenges, as each organization's requirements for property appraisals, environmental surveys and other documentation vary.

"It's a balancing act, understanding the requirements of each agency," says Donna Sasscer Agriculture Manager for St. Mary's County Department of Economic Development. And then getting all of the partners and land owners to agree on the easement language is another challenge, Greb added.

In the last two years, available funding and the number of partners working to preserve the Navy's mission has expanded with the formation of the Middle Chesapeake Sentinel Landscape, a federal collaboration among DOD, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, and a diverse set of local stakeholders working to protect lands within a swath of southern and eastern Maryland, along with parts of Delaware and Virginia.

While the partners' individual goals — such as protecting critical areas for wildlife, agricultural production and Navy flight testing — differ, they converge around the objective of limiting incompatible development underneath the flight paths of aircraft in the ATR.

Formation of the Sentinel Landscape has extended the reach of the REPI program, not only by offering new sources of funding but by creating new opportunities. The initiative has brought together stakeholders that we weren't currently collaborating with in an effort to identify the best ways to leverage available funding, explained Russell Byrd, Community Planning Liaison for NAS Patuxent River.

"It fosters a holistic approach to land conservation", Byrd said.