SOUTHERN INDIANA SENTINEL LANDSCAPE

Questions and Answers:

Q1: Why did the USDA, DoD, and DOI establish the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership?

The USDA, DoD, and DOI established the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership in 2013 to streamline federal assistance to landowners in areas where they have shared interests. Voluntary landowner assistance programs across the three federal agencies typically provide funding to permanently protect a property through a conservation easement or help to offset costs associated with preserving natural resources. However, despite using similar funding mechanisms, USDA, DoD, and DOI programs vary significantly with respect to scope and mission. By aligning federal assistance programs around military installations and ranges, sentinel landscapes allow USDA, DoD, and DOI to mitigate internal resource constraints and advance their collective objectives.

In 2018, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) introduced language that formally recognized the Partnership in statute. Under Section 317 of the NDAA, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior are encouraged to give any eligible landowner or agricultural producer within a designated sentinel landscape, "priority consideration for participation in any easement, grant, or assistance programs administered by that Secretary's department."

Q2: How do sentinel landscapes work?

Representatives from the USDA, DoD, and DOI coordinate the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership at the national level through the Federal Coordinating Committee (FCC). The FCC defines sentinel landscapes as areas in which natural and working lands are well suited to protect defense facilities from land use that is incompatible with the military's mission. The FCC designates locations as sentinel landscapes and then works to deliver voluntary federal assistance to landowners who sustainably manage their properties as farms, ranches, timberlands, or open space.

While the three founding agencies maintain oversite of the Partnership, sentinel landscapes are predominantly local enterprises. Each sentinel landscape relies on a network of local partners to carry out conservation projects on the ground. In addition to federal assistance, participating states, local governments, and NGOs provide funding and program-specific support to interested landowners within sentinel landscapes. Working throughout all tiers of government and within the private sector enables sentinel landscapes to address the needs of local communities while also fulfilling the mission of the USDA, DoD, and DOI.

Q3: How do sentinel landscapes help the military?

Sentinel landscapes promote land use around defense facilities that is compatible with the military's mission. The DoD's ability to conduct realistic live-fire training and weapon system testing is vital in preparing the warfighter and their equipment for real-world combat. However, heightened development, loss of habitat, and other encroachment concerns outside an installation's fence line can constrain the military's ability to carry out its training and testing activities.

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USDA, DoD, and DOI mitigate this challenge through the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership by directing federal resources to projects that advance sustainable land management practices around military installations and ranges. Sustainable land management practices such as farming, ranching, and forestry act as buffers around defense facilities for light pollution, spectrum interference, and other common side effects of incompatible development.

Sentinel landscapes build on existing efforts made by the DoD's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program. The DoD REPI Program provides authority and funding for cost-sharing partnerships between the Military Services, state and local governments, and private organizations to acquire conservation easements from willing landowners. These acquisitions promote compatible land use and preserve important natural resources and habitat surrounding military installations and ranges.

Despite exceptional gains thus far, traditional REPI partnerships alone are insufficient to guarantee long-term mission sustainability. Encroachment pressures are projected to grow as the country continues to grapple with the effects of population growth and urban sprawl. Sentinel landscapes address this gap by aligning REPI projects with other federal landowner assistance programs within the USDA and DOI. Furthermore, sentinel landscapes encourage collaborative conservation projects around defense facilities that leverage resources from state and local governments and NGOs.

Q4: How do sentinel landscapes support natural and working lands?

Sentinel landscape projects leverage resources from a diverse network of defense, agricultural, and conservation stakeholders, which enables them to address ecological challenges that extend beyond the scope of any one organization. Most sentinel landscape projects are designed to help private landowners keep their properties sustainably managed as forests, farms, ranches, or open space. Over time, these projects form corridors of permanently protected and sustainably managed land that limit habitat fragmentation; improve water, air, and soil quality for agricultural producers; and protect imperiled species. Landscape-scale conservation projects within sentinel landscapes have contributed to the delisting of several threatened and endangered species and helped restore critical ecological.

Q5: How do sentinel landscapes benefit private landowners?

Through sentinel landscapes, federal, state, and local partners work together to explicitly acknowledge and reward private landowners for their stewardship practices. By keeping their lands as farms, ranches, timberlands, or open space, landowners have for years—and without due recognition—significantly contributed to the military's mission and other public benefits. These properties buffer military installations from urban sprawl, help to preserve high quality ecosystems, and reduce light pollution, which is invaluable to night-vision training. The goal of a sentinel landscape is to provide willing and interested landowners with the resources they need to continue to manage their properties sustainably.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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