



2021 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation Award

Each year since 1962, the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) has honored installations, teams, and individuals for outstanding achievements in Department of Defense (DoD) environmental programs. These accomplishments include outstanding conservation activities, innovative environmental practices, and partnerships that improve quality of life and promote efficiencies without compromising DoD’s mission success. The 2021 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards cycle encompasses an achievement period from October 1, 2018, through September 30, 2020 (Fiscal Years (FY) 2019-2020). A diverse panel of 47 judges with relevant expertise representing Federal and state agencies, academia, and the private sector evaluated all nominees to select one winner for each of the eight categories. These eight categories cover five subject areas including natural resources conservation, environmental quality, sustainability, environmental restoration, and cultural resources management.

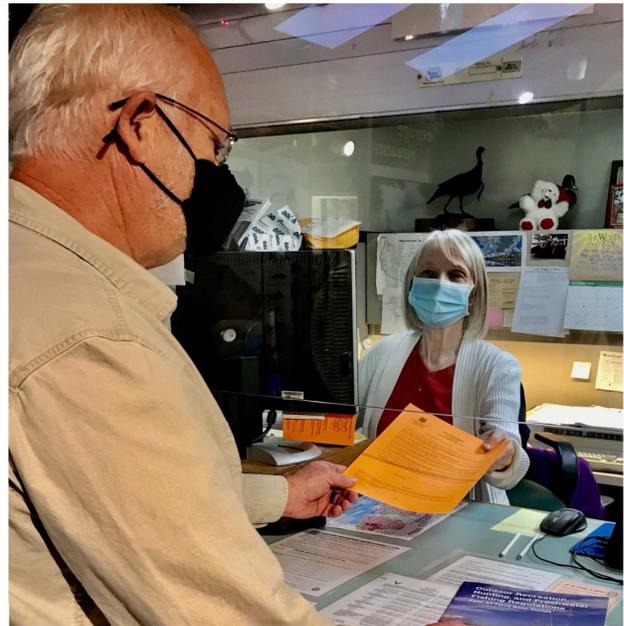
About the Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation Award

The Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation award recognizes efforts to promote the conservation of natural resources, including the identification, protection, and restoration of biological resources and habitats; the sound management and use of the land and its resources; support of the military readiness mission; and the promotion of an ecosystem management perspective. Preventing losses to threatened, endangered, and at-risk species; recovering species and their habitats; reducing bird/wildlife aircraft strike hazard incidents; proactively managing for wildfires; reducing and eradicating invasive species; and making landscapes more resilient ensure access to recreational environments while protecting ecosystems and the species that live there. Large installations have more than 10,000 acres and can include leased, military owned, or administered outlying training practice areas. The 2021 winner of the Natural Resources Conservation, Large Installation award is *Eglin Air Force Base, Florida*.

Department of Defense
OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

About Eglin Air Force Base, Florida

Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) is located along the Emerald Coast and encompasses 464,000 acres of land and 120,000 square miles of water ranges. Of that, more than 250,000 acres are open for compatible-use outdoor recreation to 11,000 military personnel, 9,500 civilian employees, 57,000 family members and retirees, and the public. Eglin is home to the 96th Test Wing (TW) and is responsible for the development, acquisition, testing, deployment, and sustainment of all air-delivered conventional weapons. The TW and its 50 associate units accomplish their missions through a symbiotic relationship with 106 rare and endangered plant and animal species found in 34 distinct ecosystems. Eglin’s Natural Resources Team (NRT) comprises a Wildlife Element and a Forestry Element who work for the Environmental Management Branch. Integrated with these employees are four members of the Eglin Wildland Fire Module who report to the Air Force Wildland Fire Branch.



NRT member, Nancy Reese, issues a recreational use permit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Major Accomplishments in FY 2019-2020

- The NRT entered into a long-term partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to conserve the reticulated flatwood salamander (RFS) population while maintaining mission sustainability. These efforts restored over 21 acres (23 percent of the total historically occupied RFS breeding habitat) and eliminated feral hog damage on an additional 140 acres of habitat. In FY 2019-2020, the NRT released RFS eggs and larvae into two unoccupied breeding wetlands. Subadult RFS were re-captured several weeks later outside both breeding wetlands, demonstrating the effectiveness of species reintroduction.
- The NRT developed a four-pronged approach to gopher tortoise conservation. To protect the USFWS Federal candidate species, Eglin will (1) consult with USFWS on all mission activities that may affect the species; (2) establish an installation-specific species recovery goal; (3) re-establish installation populations that do not conflict with mission activity; and (4) conserve the species to help influence the final listing determination in 2023. Through an FY 2020 Memorandum of Agreement with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Eglin became the primary recipient site for gopher tortoise populations displaced by alternative energy production across Florida. During FY 2019-2020, over 2,300 gopher tortoises were moved to the installation. Eglin's NRT is on track to reach its goal of 6,000 tortoises by 2023.
- Eglin is home to the largest prescribed fire program in the Air Force. Eglin established an ambitious goal to prescribe burn 90,000 acres annually across the Eglin reservation to mitigate wildfire and bolster Endangered Species Act compliance. Eglin accomplishes this task through a partnership between the NRT and the Air Force Wildland Fire Branch Eglin Wildland Support Module. During FY 2019-2020, the NRT conducted 162 prescribed burns across 153,577 acres, making Eglin one of the top five most productive prescribed fire programs in the United States across all Federal agencies. Despite shutdowns to prescribed fire activity due to COVID-19 in Spring FY 2020, the NRT completed 56 prescribed burns over 56,605 acres in FY 2020 while following all COVID-19 mitigation protocols.
- A 2017 stormwater failure on Eglin's solar array resulted in sediment discharging into Toms Creek, which is home to the Federally threatened Okaloosa darter. Through a multi-year and multi-partner response, the NRT removed approximately 100,000 cubic yards of material to stabilize the landform, construct stormwater features, and restore over seven acres of the site's wetlands and streambeds. More than 300 captivity-bred darters have been released into the site.



The NRT tags a gopher tortoise by drilling holes on the corners of its shell before releasing it into its new home deep within the base's range. The first of approximately 250 tortoises were released into their 100-acre environment after being rescued from urban development at their previous home in south Florida. Increasing gopher tortoise populations on base could prevent USFWS from listing the species on the threatened and endangered species list, which would benefit numerous military installations within the species range.



Hollister Hurt, Eglin NRT forestry technician and wildland fire specialist, monitors the progress of a fire set for a prescribed burn at White Point, an 85-acre recreation area of the Choctawhatchee Bay.