

SECRETARY OF THE ARMY ENVIRONMENTAL AWARDS 2026

REES TRAINING CENTER, OREGON ARMY NATIONAL GUARD NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION, SMALL INSTALLATION

Rees Training Center, formerly known as Umatilla Chemical Depot, is a 7500-acre training site for the Oregon Army National Guard (ORARNG). The installation provides critical training capacity for ORARNG soldiers and soldiers throughout the region, with mission-ready training space, lodging, and billeting facilities supporting units up to battalion size. Rees Training Center (RTC) offers weapons ranges, maneuver spaces, tracked vehicle driver training, and a Regional Training Institute (RTI). The training site's RTI is one of only two infantry training schools west of the Mississippi River, providing a wide range of essential courses, including Tactical Certification and Advanced Leadership.

RTC is also a critical site for natural resources conservation, particularly with respect to the Western Burrowing Owl, a USFWS Bird of Conservation Concern and one of 15 DoD Military Sensitive Species (MSS) due to its declining populations and high potential to impact the military mission. The Natural Resources Conservation (NRC) staff at the training site have achieved tremendous gains in the owl population that safeguard training viability, maximize ORARNG resources, and enhance the ORARNG relationship with the neighboring Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservations (CTUIR). In addition, the NRC staff have undertaken projects to reduce fire risk while restoring habitat, with particular priority placed on the Coyote Coulee, a Traditional Cultural Property of the CTUIR.

RTC is the cornerstone of a vital burrowing owl conservation program, incorporating not only the ORARNG, but also the neighboring CTUIR property. In 2008, when the 17,000 acres of the Depot were under Army management, the burrowing owl population on post had dwindled to just four nesting pairs, but through dedicated conservation efforts, RTC and CTUIR now support over 80 nesting pairs on 11,500 acres. The installation is now the model for burrowing owl recovery across the DoD, proving once again how readiness and stewardship are mutually reinforcing. Solidifying the species' recovery also insulates the training site from impacts associated with being the only active habitat. Over the past two years, a new artificial burrow structure has been shown to dramatically improve nesting opportunities. These artificial burrows have also been adopted by CTUIR, as the NRC staff and tribal biologists now coordinate to manage for the owls on a landscape level.

Tribal coordination also informs RTC's recent efforts to restore habitat and control invasive species on Coyote Coulee. Cheatgrass has been a perennial problem for the training site and its neighboring properties, which negatively impacts local ecology and increases the risk for wildfire. On the Coulee, NRC staff have focused on cheatgrass control and supplantation with native plants important to tribal customs. They recently completed a prescribed fire to treat the Coulee site and reduce fuel loads, followed by targeted herbicide applications. With these treatments completed, the NRC staff have signed an intergovernmental agreement with Oregon State University and the USGS FIREss Team to begin reseeding native grasses and forbs this fall on over 350 acres, with restoration projects to continue over the next several years.

The Natural Resources staff and the Cultural Resources Manager for the ORARNG jointly undertake stewardship on the training site, combining their expertise to achieve a



Program Management



Technical Merit



Orientation to Mission



Transferability



Stakeholder Interaction



Program Impact

coordinated approach to environmental management that meets both program's goals. The NRC program also works in tandem with Integrated Training Area Management (ITAM) where the interests of habitat enhancement and training access intersect. Last year, the NRC program obtained funds to purchase herbicide applicator equipment, thus allowing ITAM and NRC to conduct chemical treatment of invasive species in house. This investment now saves the ORARNG considerably, as it has eliminated the need for outside contracts for most herbicide applications. Aside from the cost savings, bringing this task in house gives RTC flexibility in timing applications with respect to seasonal changes; with this efficiency, the NRC program never risks missing a treatment window that would allow invasive plants to regain a foothold.



Cost savings and in-house work are hallmarks of RTC's environmental programs. The artificial burrows introduced for owls, for instance, are created with 55-gallon apple juice barrels that are donated by the local Tree Top plant; the 100 barrels donated last year will create 200 burrows, and the ORARNG will only need to purchase small amounts of metal mesh and perforated tubing. The ORARNG received Army Resiliency funds in 2024 to support purchase of these materials, and CTUIR also contributed funds for annual repair and upgrades to older burrows. The maintenance of the burrows is also minimal. The NRC staff need only conduct an annual sweep of each burrow to improve access. The NRC program has also pursued grants and special funding opportunities to support NRC goals. Using Army Resiliency funds awarded this year, RTC is partnering now with Oregon State University and experts with the US Geological Survey (USGS) Fire, Invasives, and Restoration of Shrub Steppe (FIREss) Team to complete floral planning level surveys that will focus on invasive exotic plants, rare species, species of cultural value, species that have unique contributions to fuel loads and fire risks, and species that are potential sources of restoration seed or propagules. The FIREss team will also provide expert support and resources needed to guide NRC staff with prescribed fire experiments and restoration actions. Data will be used to create customized fire models and revise the installations Integrated Wildland Fire Management Plan (IWFMP). These efforts directly support the training site's Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP) goals to promote native vegetation and minimize the risks of wildfire. The first ARNG INRMP for the training site was signed in January 2025.

The western burrowing owl, an Oregon state species of concern, has been in decline throughout its range for many years, which makes RTC's success with the bird all the more important. The techniques pioneered by the Global Owl Project with support from the NRC program have proven effective and could be easily adopted by other military installations and agencies.



The Army built the Umatilla Army Depot during WWII (1941), took on storage of Chemical weapons in the 1960s, and maintained it as a storage installation until the BRAC process began. Over that time, badgers were extirpated



Once fitted with a unique U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band, burrowing owl nestlings are given a health check, weighed, and dusted for fleas as needed before being returned to the burrow.



from the land. In 2017, the Army transferred use and control of 7,500 acres of the old Depot to ORARNG officially. A consequence of the loss of badgers, however, was that owls and other ground nesting wildlife that relied upon abandoned badger burrows no longer had any place to nest or ways to protect young fledglings. With guidance from USFWS and founder of the Global Owl Project, David Johnson, the Army's NRC program worked diligently to increase burrowing owl numbers with artificial burrow installations. From just four nesting pairs in 2008, the artificial burrows located on RTC and CTUIR now support over 100 nesting pairs, and 498 birds fledged from the colony in 2024 alone. Johnson has continued to work with RTC as well, conducting research to improve owl productivity and inform conservation management for the species. A 16-year demography of the owls is now complete, and the data from this effort is now becoming available to the broader conservation community.

The larger burrowing owl colony extends beyond RTC's perimeter, with many of the owls present on CTUIR adjacent property granted to the tribe through the BRAC process. The species is of particular interest to the tribe; in fact, the depot land transferring to the tribes will be named Papiunmí Tanawtpamá Tičám, which translates to "home of the burrowing owl" in their native language. Over the past two years, the NRC program has developed relationships with the tribe and its biologist to coordinate habitat support for the owls. NRC and tribal staff now jointly manage all the owl burrows, assisting each other with annual maintenance and new burrow installation.

RTC's new burrow design is intentionally simple and low-cost. A 55-gallon barrel is cut in half and fitted with perforated tubing as an access point and simple wire mesh to prevent

predators from entering. Plastic barrels are attached to the top of the half barrel which facilitates monitoring efforts. The burrows are then buried with only the mouth of the entrance appearing above ground. Maintenance is also minimal, taking no more than 15 or so minutes at each burrow each year. NRC staff will open the nest chamber to ensure other animals are not present and that the entrance tube and entry are clear of any debris. They also improve the entrance to the burrows with weed matting and pea gravel to prevent weeds from blocking access. With these improvements, an artificial burrow will last 15 years or more.

Creating burrows seems to be the most effective way to increase population, but the NRC program also works to minimize take by predators. Burrows are placed away from powerlines and fencelines where raptors, particularly

ravens, perch; these are one of the greatest threats to fledglings. In addition to protective wire mesh, the burrows are fortified with rocks when they are buried to prevent coyotes from digging into the nests. Food sources for the owls remain relatively stable, and the CTUIR is investigating



Biologist and Director of the Global Owl Project, David "DJ" Johnson and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist installing an artificial burrow. As an engineer prior to becoming an owl biologist, DJ's improved burrow designs and passion for the species have been instrumental in the conservation of the burrowing owl range-wide.



the reintroduction of badgers to augment nesting habitat as well. With the management strategy in place, RTC is the most stable and successful burrowing owl colony in the west. The installation is working with the Global Owl Project, DoD AKN, Idaho State University, University of Idaho, the Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife, CTUIR, and USFWS to learn more about the owls' lifecycle and habits. Every owl and fledgling on RTC since 2008 has been banded, allowing biologists to track returns to the training site, but new telemetry tracking is now revealing overwintering behaviors and migration ranges that extend to southern California—which means that owl decline could impact scores of military installations.

Tribal partnership has been an important factor in invasive species management and habitat improvement on RTC as well. Coyote Coulee is a traditional cultural property on RTC, with restrictions on offroad travel to protect the area. The NRC program is implementing a long-term restoration plan to reduce cheatgrass and other invasive species and reintroduce native plants, all with tribal input. NRC staff continue to consult with the tribal biologist and botanist to develop a plan for species priority.

Wildfire at RTC is particularly dangerous, for both operations and ecology. Fires allow cheatgrass and other invasive species to outcompete native plants, and cheatgrass creates dangerous fuel load conditions. On the Coulee, the fuel load was particularly risky, as a fungal disease had caused bitterbrush shrubs to die off, leaving acres of dead, six-foot-tall shrubs that burn extremely hot. A fire on the Coulee would seriously endanger RTC's cantonment. To address these issues, OMD Wildland Fire and the NRC program conducted a very targeted prescribed fire on 350 acres followed by a preemergent herbicide application to reduce cheatgrass recovery. Some

sections are scheduled for reburning, with seeding expected to begin this fall. Recovery of native grasses will benefit the training site's other grassland birds, including long-billed curlews and grasshopper sparrows that have been in decline nationwide. The NRC program completed in-house breeding bird surveys this year to acquire a baseline for bird populations and subsequent changes, which will in turn help to validate the habitat enhancement efforts.

The Army Resiliency awarded to RTC will allow OSU and the FIREss team the ability to provide floral plant and community vegetation surveys. The surveys will focus on invasive exotic plants, rare species, species of cultural value, species that have unique contributions to fuel loads and fire risks, and species that are potential sources of restoration seed or propagules. The FIREss team is also providing recommendations for restoration strategy and treatment priorities to reduce fire risk. Cheatgrass on the post has degraded cryptobiotic soils that limit fire intensity and spread, so eliminating those plants in favor of native species is key. Russian thistle is also a major fire threat; when the thistles dry out and become tumbleweeds, they are highly



Prescribed burn on Coyote Coulee focused on the removal of highly flammable fuels in protection of Cantonment and remaining native shrubs. Plant species under consideration for post-fire restoration include those that are culturally important to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

flammable and can rapidly spread fires by blowing throughout the training site. Accumulated tumbleweeds also impede training access. As part of habitat restoration, the NRC program is developing a plan to conduct prescribed fires on test plots in-house, using expertise, guidance, and data input from OSU and FIREss team staff. These test plots will allow the NRC program to evaluate different fire intensities and timing with respect to vegetation impact and fuel loads. With this data, the installation will be positioned to better respond to and proactively prevent wildfire as well as to reduce fuel loads without harming native bunchgrasses. With additional Army Resiliency funds awarded this year, this effort has expanded the research and deliverables to include development of fuel load maps and fire modeling over the next five years.



All of the NRC undertakings at RTC are in service of the military mission, clearly demonstrating how excellent environmental management safeguards readiness. Initiatives to control invasive species and restore native vegetation are obviously a benefit for the local ecosystem—but they also reduce fuel loads for wildfire and improve access to training lands for soldiers. The partnerships the NRC program has established, particularly with the CTUIR, and this year with OSU and the FIREss team, have helped staff to achieve much greater landscape and species management impacts with limited resources. Working in tandem with ITAM and the Oregon Training Center has also helped the NRC program to align environmental objectives with training priorities; in-house control of invasive plants also helps to ensure that treatments are not delayed by contracting inefficiencies.



At the installation level, the burrowing owl recovery project has kept the needs of soldiers firmly at the forefront. The artificial burrows have been designed to minimize cost, minimize maintenance, and maximize longevity and impact. What is more, the burrows can be easily relocated when owls are not nesting, allowing the NRC program to accommodate the preferences of trainers or new training activities. The burrows can also be relocated for any new construction or infrastructure needs without negatively impacting the owls; this year, for example, this year RTC required a staging area with gravel parking for large vehicles—and NRC staff were able to simply move the burrows to other areas on post.



Due to the 2023 discovery of unexploded ordnance along the eastern boundary of the former Ammunition Disposal Area (ADA) and subsequent expansion of the ADA safety buffer, 11 artificial burrowing owl nests within the safety buffer are no longer accessible. The NRC staff is using FY25 funds and contracting UXO safety specialists to provide long-term access to the burrows and establish a path that avoids subsurface anomalies that represent potential UXO. This will allow NRC staff access to the burrows for the annual maintenance needed to preserve owls' access to the nest chambers. This also contributes to mission readiness; by regaining access to these burrows, there is no need to replace the established sites with new ones elsewhere on the depot.

Beyond RTC, however, owl recovery is potentially a significant challenge facing many installations. Increasing fledglings and survival rates on RTC means there are more owls to repopulate other areas in the range. The goal is to reverse the species decline and thereby prevent the owls from becoming listed as threatened or endangered; such a status change would undoubtedly create issues and training impediments for the 52 military installations within the owl's range. It is this potential impact that has made the species a priority for the DoD AKN Program, and RTC is working with that group and other state and federal agencies, universities, and non-profits to contribute to the knowledge base about the owls, particularly about where they go when they are not nesting on the training site.



The burrows developed on RTC present a proven technique that other impacted installations could easily adopt: inexpensive, effective, and easy to deconflict with training. All of RTC's lessons learned in rebuilding the installation's colony are being freely shared throughout the DoD and with other land management agencies; guidance is currently being written on the burrow design and maintenance protocol. DoD AKN staff visited the training site last year to begin designing a monitoring protocol based on RTC's work, which is now available on their website. The ongoing research efforts since recovery first began have resulted in the most complete genealogical study of the owls anywhere; this information is now being deployed with researchers to learn more about the transmission of genetic characteristics. In particular, researchers are concerned with genetic factors in vocalization which play a role in breeding behaviors.

The success of the owl burrows has established RTC as the authority on the region. Aside from DoD AKN, the training site has been visited by University of Boise scientists and Idaho Army National Guard environmental staff to observe burrow construction and installation. The ORARNG provided some of the donated barrels to the IDARNG, in fact, who are now using the RTC burrow design on their own installations. In collaboration with DoD AKN, the installation hosted an owl training event this past year, open to all Army and Guard as well as tribal participants and state agencies.



Natural resources management has led to enhanced relationships between the ORARNG and CTUIR. The tribe's lands are immediately adjacent to RTC, and both organizations share the same goals to restore native habitats and support local species. Over the past two years, RTC and CTUIR have achieved the strongest of working relationships, assisting each other with burrow installation and maintenance throughout the owl colony. RTC and CTUIR collaborate on breeding group surveys, using the same protocols so that data sharing is seamless, thereby increasing the overall data set and validity of trend analysis. The tribe has a dedicated team for natural resources conservation, including biologists and botanists, and this team is readily available to assist with annual maintenance of burrows on the training site. The NRC staff serve as liaisons for the tribal biologists to coordinate project activities with RTC range control as well. Tribal inputs have been essential to the habitat restoration of Coyote Coulee, with tribal biologists and botanists helping to identify the native species prioritized for propagation.

RTC's partnership with the Global Owl Project has been the foundation for ground-breaking research on the species, information that continues to drive scientific study and DoD AKN guidance for the military. The Global Owl Project, in fact, was instrumental in obtaining the donated drums for



1SG Lester McCoy of the Oregon Training Command holding a burrowing owl nestling during an outreach event in June that invited Soldiers, employees and their families to assist with monitoring and learn how the conservation of the owl can be achieved without inhibiting Soldier training.

artificial burrows from Tree Top; RTC and CTUIR staff were able to utilize old Global Owl Project contacts with the company and pooled resources for a joint trip to Washington to collect barrels. On post, NRC staff encourage range control and employees to join in site visits to the owl colony; educating ORARNG Soldiers is critical, so that they understand the role they play in promoting species recovery. This summer, the NRC program hosted an event for employees and soldiers to observe owl banding, and many other events have been held to promote research access. This year's RTC Owl Days event hosted 19 people over four days, including Oregon Military Department staff, family members, RTC Range Control, the Training Site Manager, members of the Oregon Training Command, and Regional Training Institute staff. The ORARNG PAOs office and the Northwest Public Broadcasting join in as well, and the Oregonian just completed a third article about the depot owls. All participants were provided a 30-minute educational presentation and Q&A about the background of the owl project, conservation achievements, and why conservation of the owls on RTC is so important to the military mission. Through this outreach across agencies and stakeholders, internal and external, the installation continues to demonstrate not only its own excellence in stewardship, but also its value to the wider conservation community.