



2026 Department of War

Environmental Awards

Environmental Quality – Team

Eglin Environmental Management Team, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida

Introduction

Situated along the Emerald Coast and extending into the heart of Florida’s panhandle, Eglin Air Force Base (Eglin) is home to the 96th Test Wing, which is responsible for the development, acquisition, testing, deployment, and sustainment of all air-delivered conventional weapons. Eglin is the Department of the Air Force’s (DAF) largest installation and stretches into four counties, encompassing 464,000 acres of land ranges, 123,000 square miles of water ranges, and 153 miles of shoreline. The Eglin reservation is next to the Gulf of America and has more than 70 distinct test areas and 440 tactical training areas. This unique setting and overwater airspace combine to provide a sea-to-land transition area – a vital resource for modern weapons system testing, as well as an environmental challenge that Eglin continually meets. The 96th Test Wing hosts nine wing/wing equivalents and thirty-five

associate units comprised of Air Force, Army, Marine, Space Force, and Navy personnel that accomplish their missions while maintaining a symbiotic relationship with 306 rare and protected plant and animal species. Eglin also maintains 3,188 facilities, 280 of which Eglin has registered or determined are eligible for registry on the National Register of Historic Places. The total workforce population is approximately 20,000, including 9,000 military personnel and 11,000 civilians and contractors. Eglin’s annual economic impact on the local community is \$9.2B.

Eglin demonstrates an extraordinary and unwavering commitment to balancing military necessity with public trust, ensuring access to 250,000 acres of its reservation for public recreation while rigorously safeguarding national security and mission availability. Amidst this high-tempo operational environment, Eglin’s Environmental Management program has proven itself to be

an indispensable force multiplier. The team expertly navigates the labyrinth of complex environmental regulations to deliver robust, compliant, and highly innovative solutions that directly enable and enhance mission success across this vast and ecologically sensitive enterprise, ensuring the long-term success of both the military mission and the natural environment for generations to come.

Background

Eglin's 96th Civil Engineer Group, Environmental Management Branch (EM team), is the foundational pillar and driving force behind the installation's exemplary and award-winning environmental stewardship program. The Branch's core mission is to preserve a remarkable and globally significant assemblage of biodiversity—from sprawling, old-growth longleaf pine forests to pristine, undeveloped barrier islands—while simultaneously providing the nation's premier proving ground to develop and deliver decisive firepower to the warfighter. This dedicated and multi-disciplinary team is composed of 48 highly skilled civilian engineers, scientists, biologists, archeologists, foresters, forestry technicians, and environmental protection specialists. These professionals are strategically organized into three core sections that work in close concert: Environmental Compliance, Natural Resources Management (composed of Wildlife and Forestry), and Environmental Assets (composed of Cultural Resource Management and Environmental Planning). This cohesive and integrated environmental quality team, working in seamless partnership with the installation's 115 commander-appointed Unit Environmental Coordinators (UECs), has driven a culture of continual improvement through its highly rated and mature Environmental Management System (EMS). This system is the bedrock of the program, meticulously identifying the most significant environmental aspects that could threaten the success of the military mission

and the health of the environment. This proactive identification allows the team to develop and track highly targeted and effective action plans for a wide range of critical areas, such as stationary internal combustion engine maintenance, erosion prevention at irreplaceable cultural sites, and the accuracy of hazardous material data, all of which result in substantially reduced risk to the mission and the environment.



Eglin Environmental Management

The leaders of Eglin's Environmental Management Team guide a 48-person team of scientists, engineers, and specialists who ensure the long-term success of the Department of the Air Force's largest installation, directly supporting military readiness through proactive environmental stewardship.

During the demanding FY24-FY25 award period, the team doubled down on its unwavering commitment to enabling Department of War (DoW) missions while simultaneously protecting one of the largest and most significant natural infrastructure portfolios in the entire DoW. This steadfast dedication was critical as mission activities associated with emerging global threats drove a significant increase in environmental impact analysis requests, including a 400% increase in Environmental Assessments and Environmental Impact Statements from FY24 to FY25. The team met this surge in demand without any compromise in quality or compliance. The active and rigorous use of a robust internal self-inspection program served as a powerful accountability measure, expertly guiding the identification and correction of potential issues and culminating in a perfect record of ZERO enforcement actions after comprehensive regulatory inspections of

108 distinct sites. To embed environmental consciousness across the installation, the team provides weekly outreach to the 20,000-strong installation workforce. This dedicated communication fosters a shared culture of compliance and stewardship. Monthly meetings for the 115 UECs, representing 54 organizations, reinforces emphasis on accountability measures and keeps these critical coordinators fully engaged and informed. The team perfected the permit process and successfully managed 229 permits and 115 tank registrations, with program managers ensuring the meticulous, up-to-date content and flawless implementation of 12 installation-level management plans that cover a wide array of programs including Hazardous Waste, Cultural Resources, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste. A cornerstone of Eglin's sustained success is its proactive pursuit and cultivation of robust partnerships with local, state, and federal entities. The most notable of these is the biannual partnering meeting with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), for which Eglin proudly serves as the DoW lead, fostering relationships that accelerate critical decisions and advocate for the military mission.

Accomplishments

In a striking demonstration of rapid response and environmental expertise, the EM team prevented a fuel spill from escalating into a long-term environmental liability. Eglin Command Post notified the team on 7 January 2025 that an F-16 released a 300-gallon fuel pod between two private residences. The team arrived within 30 minutes, mobilized an emergency response contractor and initiated response actions. The team's immediate action and thorough knowledge of environmental regulations were key to positioning assets and commencing cleanup following Safety Investigation Board's site release 30 hours later. The team expertly managed the multi-agency scene over four

weeks. Disposal of assorted fuel impacted items was accomplished immediately. Over 1,200 cubic yards of contaminated soil and debris were excavated. Rapid determination of impacted areas and proactive deployment of plastic sheeting prevented migration of contaminants to groundwater during rain events.

Averting Environmental Restoration Program designation saved an estimated \$1.5M in cleanup costs and avoided a projected three-year remediation timeline. The decisive and proactive actions spared residents from significant disruption and safeguarded the strong relationship between Eglin and the community.

Inter-Agency Success in Complex EOD Ensures Community Safety

A routine legacy water range assessment on 14 February 2024 escalated into a high-stakes emergency with the discovery of a 1,000-pound bomb and two 250-pound bombs in Choctawhatchee Bay. The unexploded ordnance (UXO) posed an immediate and complex threat, located just 400 yards from a residential shoreline and near a main underwater fiber optic line — a critical piece of regional infrastructure.

This triggered a first-of-its-kind challenge for Eglin: the first-ever emergency disposal of UXO in a water environment. With no existing precedent, the team was required to navigate a complex web of environmental regulations under an emergency timeline. In an extraordinary display of agility, they accomplished first-time assessments and secured compliance in four distinct regulatory areas: Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) permitting for hazardous materials, and critical assessments for the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the Florida State Historic Preservation Officer (FSHPO), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA), ensuring all potential impacts to marine mammals and protected species were identified and mitigated.

This monumental regulatory effort happened in parallel with a masterclass in interagency coordination. The team seamlessly orchestrated a complex response involving the U.S. Coast Guard for waterway security, U.S. Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) for the technical handling and underwater towing of the ordnance, as well as county offices, multiple regulatory agencies, and various DAF organizations.

The flawless execution of this complex operation resulted in the safe, successful detonation of all three bombs without incident, preventing any delay to the original assessment schedule. More importantly, the outstanding effort transformed a potential crisis into a relationship-building success, strengthening trust and streamlining collaboration with key regulatory partners for all future operations.

In a visionary effort to enhance future mission readiness, the EM team spearheaded a strategic partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Argonne National Laboratory (ANL). Between July and December 2024, this collaboration resulted in a comprehensive underwater archaeological survey of a vast 21.25-square-nautical-mile area within the Gulf of America. This proactive initiative directly addressed a significant operational bottleneck. Previously, each proposed offshore mission in a new area required its own time-consuming archaeological clearance, a process that typically delayed operations by 30 days. By surveying and pre-clearing this extensive operational area in a single, coordinated effort, the team effectively eliminated this recurring delay for all future activities within its boundaries, saving an estimated \$2M in costs over the award period and an estimated \$250,000 per test mission going forward.

This accomplishment is a powerful force multiplier, providing mission planners with unprecedented flexibility and speed. The elimination of the 30-day clearance window

allows for more agile and responsive testing and training, ensuring that future offshore missions can proceed on schedule and without impediment. This foresight transforms a bureaucratic hurdle into a strategic advantage, directly enhancing the installation's long-term readiness and operational tempo. Leveraging the value of developing a long-term approach provides flexibility beyond the current mission scope, allowing Eglin to be the forefront of testing and aligning with DoW goals of rapid acquisition.

A Force Multiplier for Environmental Stewardship

In a landmark shift of environmental responsibility, the EM team forged a new model of stewardship that will enhance efficiency for years to come. Breaking from historical precedent, the team successfully coordinated with base Real Property, a lessee, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) to execute the first-ever lessee-funded cleanup of illegally dumped waste on the Eglin reservation.

Historically, the burden of cleaning up community-dumped waste—even within leased areas—fell to the EM team and community volunteers, draining valuable time and resources. This pioneering effort, which removed approximately 40 cubic yards of waste, establishes a powerful new protocol where lessees are now active partners in maintaining their leased areas.

This strategic success is more than a one-time cleanup; it establishes a durable process that can be replicated across all leased lands. By empowering lessees to take ownership of their environments, this new framework acts as a force multiplier, freeing up critical EM personnel and volunteer resources to be dedicated to higher-priority conservation and restoration projects across the installation. This lessee-funded cleanup model is a highly transferable strategy that empowers other DoW installations to shift the burden of waste

management, freeing up internal resources for core mission support.



An illegal dump site on Eglin leased property
An inspection of an illegal dump site initiated a first-of-its-kind lessee-funded cleanup, establishing a new protocol that enhances stewardship and saves valuable Air Force resources.

Decades of Stewardship Lead to Species Recovery

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery

Eglin's commitment to ecosystem management has been a driving force behind the remarkable recovery of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW). Our team's expert management of the longleaf pine ecosystem, including prescribed burning and artificial cavity installation, has cultivated a thriving and resilient population of this iconic species. With the use of expertly applied prescribed fire and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved herbicide applications, the RCW population on Eglin has far outpaced the installations expected conservation contribution. With full consideration for impacts on urban environments, Eglin's prescribed fire program works to achieve forest management objectives while minimizing the impacts to air quality in populated areas by modeling smoke plumes based on forest fuels and weather conditions. In addition, technicians use EPA-registered herbicides in areas where prescribed fire alone cannot meet management objectives. This sustained success was a cornerstone of the USFWS October 2024 decision to downlist the woodpecker from "Endangered" to

"Threatened," a historic moment for one of America's most significant wildlife recovery stories. Eglin's program stands as a national model for balancing military readiness with endangered species recovery, leveraging the value of initiating consultations with regulators with a long-term approach to provide flexibility beyond the current mission tempo and scope, and saving the DoW an estimated \$100,000 per test mission conducted at Eglin due to not having to pay for costly mitigation required by the ESA. Lessons learned are shared at a national level, being presented at the National Military Fish and Wildlife Association and by partnering with Environmental Security Technology Certification Program grant recipients.



Red-cockaded Woodpecker

A wildlife technician with the 96th Civil Engineer Group, holds a male Red-cockaded woodpecker during population monitoring at Eglin Air Force Base, FL. Proactive water and air quality management have assisted in recovery of the species, which in turn allow for mission flexibility on the Range.

Partnerships Protecting Coastal Species

Volunteer hours protecting sea turtles and shore birds

The team ensured zero delays to military operations amidst sensitive wildlife, including 108 sea turtles and 174 shorebird nests. A dedicated force of community volunteers, contributing over 5,600 hours (an equivalent of nearly three full-time employees), made this success possible by proactively relocating nests from critical training areas.

Partner funding for habitat restoration

In a powerful collaboration with partner agencies, the team restored 147 acres of crucial habitat for the Florida Bog Frog and Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander. This collaborative effort included work to remove woody vegetation in wetlands. The hand-removal of woody plant encroachment within these wetlands encourages more herbaceous plant growth that not only improves habitat conditions for these at-risk species, but also improves ecosystem health and function, improving water quality and reducing heavy sediment pollutants from entering waterbodies. This initiative, which utilized \$478,000 of partner-agency funding, was accomplished at no cost to the Department of the Air Force and led to a landmark achievement: the highest number of occupied Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander breeding wetlands ever recorded for a single season, surpassing all other known locations for this endangered species. The Eglin team has submitted a paper to the journal *Animal Conservation* on “Successful translocation of an imperiled amphibian following targeted habitat restoration efforts,” sharing our lessons learned with the wider scientific audience.

Fire and timber stewardship to protect water and air while generating revenue

The team completed 171,041 acres of prescribed fire, improving endangered species habitat and reducing mission downtime by 40% in 2025. The Eglin EM team coordinated all prescribed fire operations through a robust public affairs notification system that ensured notification to surrounding communities in advance of any potential smoke impacts from the fires. Eglin's resource management team demonstrated an unwavering commitment to both the military mission and the delicate ecosystem they stewarded. Furthermore, the team achieved significant ecological advancements. They removed over 190,000 tons of invasive sand pine and

hardwood encroachment through commercial timber sales, enhancing more than 3,000 acres of habitat for ESA-listed species as well as protecting sensitive riparian areas to ensure the protection of pristine waterways. This also generated \$1.7M in revenue for future on-installation habitat restoration that supports clean water and recreation opportunities for the local communities. The team also achieved record-breaking native grass planting and harvesting, collecting and sowing over 1,600 pounds of seed on 200 acres, and planting an additional 90 acres of containerized native grass/wiregrass plugs, restoring native ground cover and restoring native ground cover that improves forest conditions, minimizes wildfire, and reduces large particulates in smoke generated by prescribed fire.



Restoring Balance with Environmental Stewardship
A Natural Resources Specialist and partner from Virginia Tech, monitors a prescribed fire at Eglin Air Force Base, FL.

Balancing Public Recreation with Mission Security and Safety

The team ensured seamless mission compatibility for the DoW's largest compatible-use Outdoor Recreation program, managing access to over 250,000 acres of Eglin's 464,000-acre installation. This effort issued 53,088 permits and generated over \$1M in revenue. These funds make the DoW's largest compatible-use recreation program entirely self-sufficient, requiring zero appropriated funds for its operation. In response to a hunting-related accident in FY25, the team updated regulations to enhance safety, including no longer allowing shooting down or across deer trails,

implementation of a lottery system quota to reduce hunter densities, and adjustments to the hunting season dates to avoid high-mission-tempo timeframes.



Understanding Eglin's New Permitting Process

A Permit Salesclerk at Eglin's Natural Resources Office takes great care explaining the new security vetting process for recreation permits.

Demonstrating a commitment to installation security, the team directly improved the vetting process by collaborating with the Security Forces Squadron to interface existing background check software into the iSportsman permitting website, ensuring that recreational permits for installation access are only issued to individuals who pass the required background check. Additionally, the team created Coastal Restriction Area (CRA) Permits to manage public access within coastal areas buffering specific Eglin properties, and integrated CRA boundaries into the Public Access Map (PAM), promoting responsible recreation and protecting sensitive resources. The successful integration of background check software with the iSportsman platform provides a transferable security solution for any installation managing a public recreation program.

Safety in High Definition

Affirming their commitment to the safety of both military personnel and the recreating public, Eglin's EM team spearheaded a crucial modernization of the installation's primary safety briefing. Recognizing that the mandatory UXO/Safety video was 14 years old and technologically outdated, the team coordinated a comprehensive overhaul to address the current inherent risks of outdoor recreation on an active military installation. This vital update replaces dated material with crisp, high-definition imaging and clearer, more urgent messaging. The new video provides unambiguous instruction on UXO awareness and strict reporting protocols, ensuring all users understand the dangers and their personal responsibility.

Crucially, the briefing now explicitly emphasizes a core principle: outdoor recreation is a privilege that must remain compatible with and subordinate to Eglin's military mission. This proactive measure ensures that every one of the thousands of annual permit holders is equipped with the modern knowledge necessary to stay safe, respect operational boundaries, and coexist with the critical testing and training activities that define the installation.



A 1960 B-70 test bomb

A B-70 test bomb from the 1960s lies on a range at Eglin Air Force Base, FL. The expended ordnance highlights the installation's critical test and evaluation mission and the need for constant safety awareness.