

Town Hall Meeting Summary

Town Hall Title

Developing Successful Ecosystem Services Projects to Support Military Training: Soliciting Ideas from Landowners, Conservation Stakeholders, Regulators, and Investors

Town Hall Organizer

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Town Hall Description

The purpose of this Town Hall session is to solicit ideas and recommendations from conference participants on how to identify and structure ecosystem services projects that would support military training and compatible land use objectives and the goals of landowners, conservation stakeholders, environmental regulators and ecosystem market investors. This session will focus on developing prototype projects that will support military infantry and aviation training requirements in the Southeast, specifically North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. These states comprise the DoD-supported Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS), and the military activities located within them share common land use, habitat protection, and ecosystem restoration challenges. The military services are interested in supporting all types of ecosystem services projects on private lands that demonstrate the potential to maintain military-compatible land uses under off-base military aviation training routes and to minimize training and land use restrictions related to threatened and endangered species management on base. Examples of prototype projects would include carbon sequestration, water quality protection, nutrient banking, habitat protection, and candidate conservation agreements, among others.

Background

Military installations and regional commands in the Southeast have been actively involved for several years in developing military-compatible land use initiatives with federal, state, and local governments and private conservation organizations to protect “working lands” and natural habitat located under low-level military training routes (MTRs), special use airspace (SUA) and terrain-flying (TERF) routes. Up to now, this work has focused primarily on coordinating conservation partnering and compatible land

use planning initiatives with federal and state agencies and conservation organizations; less effort has been spent on soliciting private landowners' opinions on how to implement these programs.

In North Carolina, military officials have done conceptual planning with state and federal agencies on developing a framework for creating market-based conservation initiatives that would pay private landowners to protect and maintain ecosystem services in ways that supported military training. They now want to proceed by developing prototype market-based conservation projects that could take two general forms. One would be projects involving direct payments by a military service to landowners to protect or restore offbase habitat (e.g. longleaf pine forests) to reduce training restrictions on base. The other would be to promote third-party ecosystem services projects, such as purchases of carbon or water quality credits by private investors or public agencies, on land located under military MTRs, TERF routes, and SUA. As part of this Town Hall discussion, Military officials are interested in soliciting ideas on how to leverage and stack ecosystem services payments and credits to maximize the attractiveness of these projects to landowners and beneficiaries of these credits.

Two issues raised by conservation stakeholders also influenced this Town Hall session. One is a desire to have the military services take the lead in developing ecosystem services projects and to establish timelines and funding sources for them. This would enable potential conservation partners to commit their time and resources based on the military services' project scopes and schedules and funding commitments. The other issue is the need for the military to understand the specific management and investment goals of working lands' owners, and to tailor ecosystem services projects to them. The ACES and Ecosystem Markets Conference presents the perfect venue for soliciting recommendations from all of these project stakeholders.

Town Hall Goals

The goal of this session is to identify the factors required for the military services to initiate and successfully execute one or more prototype ecosystem services projects in the Southeast in 2013. The objective is to have a detailed, results-oriented discussion of the factors that have kept the military services and potential conservation partners from moving ahead with these types of projects and to solicit recommendations from the audience on how to address these issues and how to structure project proposals that meet the goals of private landowners, conservation stakeholders, project investors, and the military services.

Discussion

The military services have strong incentives to consider executing ecosystem services projects, particularly to protect their military training requirements. Preservation of rural land uses such as farming and forestry and restoration of offbase habitat can help to protect military aviation training routes and to avoid habitat-related training restrictions on base. The amount of land requiring protection to safeguard military training is enormous; it can amount to hundreds of thousands of acres spanning multiple counties just for a single military installation.

Within the past few years, there has been growing interest in the Southeast in protecting and restoring longleaf pine forests as the basis for prototype military ecosystem services projects. These forests can provide red-cockaded woodpecker and gopher tortoise habitat, serve as buffers to military air and ground training, protect dark skies for night training, and recharge regional water supplies. With the start of the California carbon cap and trade program in 2012, Southeast forests are also being studied for their carbon sequestration potential.

While several organizations support these goals, including SERPPAS and the Partnership for Southern Forestland Conservation, converting this interest into actual military ecosystem services projects has yet to occur. This is due to several factors. Potential project partners are unclear as to each other's partnering processes, program objectives, long-term land use goals, budget and funding cycles, internal approval processes, and legal and administrative constraints. Equally important, individual and corporate landowners have been absent from many of these discussions, despite the fact that their participation is vital to any ecosystem services project proposed for private lands. And the military services want assurances that committing their funds for these projects will provide clear benefits to military training that can be demonstrated to Congress and to their senior leadership.

Town Hall Purpose

The purpose of this session is to identify viable types of military ecosystem services projects based on input from the full range of project stakeholders including the military services, landowners, conservation organizations, investors, and regulators. Potential projects would be focused on the Southeast, including categories such as water quality protection, carbon credits, candidate conservation agreements, and conservation banks, and others proposed by the panel members and the audience. Stakeholders will clearly describe the organizational authorities and constraints that would affect their ability to participate in prototype ecosystem services projects, including timeframes required for internal reviews and approvals. Landowners would be encouraged to explain their goals and objectives and to ask questions of the military services on how these projects would affect the use of their land.

The ultimate goal of this session is to give the military services specific recommendations on how to create ecosystem services projects that will support their encroachment management and military training goals, attract landowners, conservation partners and investors, and provide regulatory certainty to all parties involved.