

Fort Benning Serves as Backdrop for Meeting of Federal Agency Leaders on Environmental Stewardship

Executives from federal agencies with natural resources missions visited Fort Benning to discuss best practices in environmental management and stewardship in the Southeast.

The agencies represented included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Federal Highway Administration and Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The installation was chosen for the Southeast Natural Resources Leaders Group principals' meeting June 11-12 because of the installation's environmental stewardship, said Susan Gibson, director of U.S. Army Regional Environmental Office-Southern.

“(The installation’s) environmental and natural resource management reflects the hard work of many dedicated people in the Army staff and our partnering organizations,” she said. “Their efforts make Fort Benning a great example of how to successfully balance mission, the environment and community.”

SENRLG members, including the REEO-S, are committed to the common purpose of fulfilling agency mandates in ways that promote conservation and restoration of natural resources, and ecologically sustainable development, she said.

Topics covered:

- Fort Benning’s use of prescribed fire as a forest management tool that sustains military training areas, while supporting endangered species and other wildlife requirements.
- In-stream flows and the challenges of balancing the needs and competition for limited fresh-water.
- The Chattahoochee Fall Line Conservation Partnership, which illustrates the necessity and successes of collaboration.
- The Army Compatible Use Buffer Program
- Fort Benning’s cultural resource management program, which illustrated the commitments to preserving and conserving historic sites, as well as Tribal and installation consultation.

“Fort Benning has a long track record of protecting the environment, conserving its natural resources and supporting military training,” said John Brent, the Directorate of Public Work’s Environmental Management Division chief. “We have found that sustaining both military readiness and natural resources allows us to effectively advance the interests of both.”



Pete Swiderek displays a red cockaded woodpecker specimen while detailing conversation efforts at Fort Benning.

While on post, the group operated the simulators used by Soldiers in training, toured the National Infantry Museum and visited Kings Pond, where natural resources specialists and wildlife biologists discussed the installation's recovery population of red-cockaded woodpeckers, a listed endangered species, and one of only 13 such populations in the Southeast.

Many other rare species such as the gopher tortoise, gopher frog, southern hognose snake, sweet and parrot pitcher plants, and relict trillium can be found on Fort Benning. Various protected areas are designed to restore and conserve their ecosystems and enhance species recovery, explained **Pete Swiderek**, Conservation Branch manager. Such safeguarding efforts also ensure continued protection of critical military operations.

Gibson said introducing the SENRLG principals to Fort Benning left them with a lasting impression.

“They saw that the civilians and Soldiers who work and train at the installation not only maintain the military missions critical to our national security, but also are outstanding stewards of the land and environment.”