

# Well maintained training lands: a piece of the readiness puzzle

by Susan C. Galentine  
DECAM

Part of the “equipment” to train, is the land used to train upon. Equipment requires maintenance and care to perform up to standards and so does the land. Sustaining land for training purposes encompasses a myriad of coordinated efforts to ensure the safety of Soldiers and compliance with various local and, state regulations and federal statutes.

Fort Carson has long been a proactive steward of the environment while ensuring a training-ready posture at its ranges and at the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site in southeastern Colorado. These lands are not static – they contain watersheds, wetlands, wildlife, plant species, and cultural/historic resources that require consideration while simultaneously providing the realistic training environment needed for the Army to prepare for combat.

Two examples of Fort Carson’s established programs that facilitate training capability are the Directorate of Environmental Compliance and Management’s Noxious Weed and Cultural Resources Programs.

While at first glance it seems improbable that a plant poses a threat to the ability to train, noxious weeds grow at a rate and density that can create numerous problems, including the fact that laws strictly regulate the control and elimination of noxious weed species.

Despite drought conditions, noxious, nonnative weeds are prevailing on Fort Carson and at PCMS, growing along certain drainage ditches and roadsides and choking off beneficial plant life.

“While it may not seem that a few weeds are important to training, weeds increase the risk of fire danger and fires can halt training,” explained Caron Rifici, the Directorate of Environmental Compliance and Management’s Noxious Weed Manager. “Noxious weeds are also a source of erosion when the native plant communities are invaded by these plants. Erosion can create deep gullies and flooding problems across the landscape making additional and sometimes unseen hazards for our troops training in the field.”

Fort Carson has implemented what might be considered unusual strategies to rid installation lands of noxious weeds. For the past 10 years, the DECAM has taken an aggressive stance against these invasive plants. Using every means possible, including plant eating insects and weed eating goats, the DECAM effectively battles their spread, while trying to avoid the use of chemical controls harmful to humans and the environment.

Prescribed fires are another tool used to reduce fire fuel (dry vegetation) loads caused by heavy weed infestations. Some of the prescribed burn areas are then re-seeded with species that will compete and suppress weed infestations.

“It is important to know that no weed control method is permanent and that is why weed control is usually talked about in terms of being controlled versus eradicated,” Rifici explained. “All methods deal with weakening the plant to a point that it can be suppressed or controlled to a level that is acceptable.”

While the condition of the land is critical in terms of training, so can be what lies below the surface. Fort Carson and PCMS lands had a rich history long before Fort Carson was built and carry the potential for buried cultural resources. Cultural resources include historic and prehistoric archaeological sites, historic properties, and associated structures and artifacts from previous historical periods.

The Cultural Resources Program's mission is to continuously inventory Fort Carson and PCMS lands to identify resources and facilitate opening additional training areas. "As caretakers of our nation's heritage resources, the program's objectives stress preservation over mitigation, protection over destruction, while ensuring the completion of Fort Carson's military mission; a balance that takes a great deal of cooperation and planning to achieve," said Pamela Cowen, the DECAM Cultural Resources Manager.

In compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, archaeological surveys have been conducted on approximately 80 percent of Fort Carson and nearly 75 percent of the PCMS, said Cowen. From FY04 through FY06, a total of 41,295 acres have been inventoried at both sites, which paved the way for the construction of six small arms ranges, the improvement of a secondary supply route, the creation of six forward operating bases, the construction of a maneuver live fire range, and additional heavy maneuver acreage in preparation for increased training rotations.

"By working closely with the military trainers and the Directorate of Public Works planners, we are able to protect resources significant to the history of Fort Carson, the region, and the state in order to preserve this rich historical value for future generations," said Cowen.

Noxious weeds and cultural resources are just two sensitive areas factored in to managing military lands, but the objective always in sight for these programs is to ensure the land remains in prime condition for training.

For more information about sustaining training ranges, call the DECAM Sustainability Planner at 526-9777.