

FRANKLIN MOUNTAINS



WILDERNESS COALITION

Preserving Castner Range: Conservation Conveyance at Fort Bliss

What is Castner Range?

Castner Range is a former US Army firing range located in El Paso, Texas. The site's western boundary borders Franklin Mountains State Park (FMSP), the largest urban wilderness area in the United States. Each spring the range's lower slopes explode with color when wild Gold Poppies carpet the rugged desert terrain, a display found nowhere else in Texas. The land remains in its pristine natural state today thanks to the stewardship of the Army and Fort Bliss. In 1971, Castner Range was determined to be no longer needed to support the mission of Fort Bliss.

Significance of Castner Range to El Paso

Simply stated, El Pasoans are passionate about Castner Range. Castner's poppies are a source of local pride and delight, and have become symbolic of El Paso and the breathtaking beauty that can spring up unexpectedly in the stark desert.

Many El Pasoans ardently hope the poppy fields will be available for future generations to enjoy by Castner Range becoming a part of the adjacent FMSP. In 1981, the Texas Legislature provided for the adjustment of the Park's boundary in anticipation of the future addition of Castner Range lands. The presence of unexploded ordnance on Castner Range hinders the direct transfer of the land to Texas Parks and Wildlife for reasons of public safety and liability.

On March 14th, 2006, the El Paso City Council unanimously passed a resolution urging that Castner Range be "preserved and no portion... developed so that it is fully accessible and can be

used by the public for passive or active recreational use." This resolution served as the basis for a petition signed by over 5,000 people, asking US Congressman Silvestre Reyes "to work actively with Congress and the Department of the Army to achieve the preservation of all of Castner Range in its natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of all Americans forever." The petitions were presented in person to Congressman Reyes at the Franklin Mountains Poppies Celebration on March 17th, 2007, at a ceremony attended by state, county and city elected officials, as well as hundreds of local citizens.

Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) on Castner

Starting in the late 1920's, this land was used by Fort Bliss for live fire of field and air defense artillery. Over the years, UXO accumulated both on the ground surface and buried in soil. By 1966 the city of El Paso had grown so close to the borders of Castner that the Army ceased live fire training at the range. Due to the presence of UXO, the range remains closed to public entry while Fort Bliss gradually clears the land of hazards. Under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), the Army is responsible for the clean-up of UXO on Castner Range. It cannot transfer this responsibility, or the liability associated with UXO, to any other party.

The clean-up has progressed slowly over the years. The most recent Ordnance and Explosives Characterization and Cost Analysis Report commissioned by Fort Bliss (1998) recommended that "surface clearance be performed over the

entire area of Castner Range where... feasible” and that “the entire site be cleared for transfer to the State of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for an annex to the Franklin Mountains State Park.” The report notes that UXO “poses a risk to members of the public who frequently disregard the warning signs and use the land for recreational activities.” Surface clearance (contrasted to sub-surface clearance to a depth of 1 or 4 feet) was found to offer the best risk-reduction-to-cost ratio. **Surface clearance is most compatible with a minimal-disturbance future land use, such as passive recreation (hiking, birdwatching, nature photography, etc.) on protected parkland.**

Conservation Conveyance Authorized by Congress

Recently, Congress created a new means for enhancing natural resource stewardship on military lands. The Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act of FY2003 authorized conveyance of surplus military real property to non-profit organizations that exist for the primary purpose of conservation of natural resources (Section 2694a, Title 10, US Code). The deed of conveyance shall require the property to be used and maintained for the conservation of natural resources in perpetuity. This procedure is known as a **conservation conveyance**.

As a RAND Corporation Research Brief explains, “Congress authorized this mechanism to conserve ecologically valuable lands more expeditiously, recognizing that a large-scale cleanup might not be necessary on lands where human access and activities would be restricted.” **A conservation conveyance will establish immediate perpetual protection for all of Castner Range while the UXO clearance**

work continues. Under these terms, the Army will carry on with UXO clearance as time and funds permit, but Castner’s ultimate preservation will be secure.

The first application of a Conservation Conveyance took place in September 2003 when the Army transferred the 57,632-acre Honey Lake Primary Parcel (Sierra Army Depot land near Herlong, California, that was on the Base Realignment and Closure list) to an affiliate of the not-for-profit Center for Urban Watershed Renewal. Once this site is cleared of UXO, it will be transferred to the California State Lands Commission which will add it to the State Wildlife Refuge System.

Bringing About a Conservation Conveyance at Fort Bliss

The Franklin Mountains Wilderness Coalition appeals to Congress to authorize and fund the steps necessary to study, coordinate and ultimately achieve a Conservation Conveyance for Castner Range. In addition to adding a priceless jewel to Franklin Mountains State Park and fulfilling the dreams of thousands of El Pasoans, preserving Castner will provide a model for applying the Conservation Conveyance mechanism outside of the BRAC framework. This model can help other communities with nearby surplus military property to attain their own open space preservation goals.

El Pasoans are grateful to the Army for its excellent environmental stewardship of Castner Range; the time is ripe for the next steward to take up the responsibility for safeguarding this unique natural treasure. A Conservation Conveyance will accomplish the transition smoothly and promptly – it transforms the vision of preserving Castner Range into a concrete, achievable goal.



THE FRANKLIN MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS COALITION

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