



Preserving a Natural Treasure: Castner Range

What is Castner Range?

As you drive up into the mountains on Transmountain Road from Northeast El Paso, you may not realize you are driving through territory that still belongs to Fort Bliss. The land is known as “Castner Range”. It is a former US Army firing range located within the city of El Paso, Texas. The site’s western boundary borders Franklin Mountains State Park (FMSP), the largest urban wilderness park area in the Lower 48 United States. Castner Range is a 7,081-acre property that is not open to the public because there may be unexploded ordnance (UXO) on the land. In spring, the range’s lower slopes explode with color when wild Gold Poppies (*Eschscholzia californica* ssp. *mexicana*) carpet the rugged desert terrain. The land remains in its near pristine natural state today thanks to the stewardship of the Army and Fort Bliss.

Significance of Castner Range to El Paso

El Pasoans are passionate about conserving 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. The addition of Castner Range to the FMSP will address many needs beyond the park and recreation for the community, including benefits to public health, education, natural resource management, the community’s economy and the preservation of breathtaking viewsheds that define NE El Paso. Investing in the conservation of Castner Range is also an investment in our clean water and energy, all natural resources we rely on for our quality of life. The conservation of Castner Range will

preserve the fragile lands at the urban fringe around the FMSP. The preservation of additional lands will provide a network of natural areas that will preserve the community’s unique character and sense of place. The conservation of Castner Range will strengthen land ethics locally, and enhance regional habitat protection, water conservation and erosion control.

Castner Range Today

The Army is undergoing the Military Munitions Response Program (MMRP) process to determine the highest and best use for Castner Range. For the last several years, members of the boards of The Frontera Land Alliance and the Franklin Mountains Wilderness Coalition have been collaborating (as the “4C’s”—the Castner Conservation Conveyance Committee) to propose appropriate options for Castner Range. The 4C’s goal is to preserve, in perpetuity, the natural areas, wildlife corridors and natural springs that are present on Castner Range. After considerable study and work, the 4C’s and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) drafted a “Land Use Plan” to assist Fort Bliss and the Department of Defense in determining the best future use of the Range.

Current Status of Castner Range

Starting in the late 1920’s, this land was used by Fort Bliss for the live firing 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 possibility of UXO, the range remains closed to public entry. Under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), the Army is responsible for the clean-up of UXO on Castner Range. The Department of Defense cannot transfer this responsibility, or the liability associated with UXO, to any other party.

“The Ordnance and Explosives Characterization and Cost Analysis Report” commissioned by Fort Bliss (1998), recommends that “the entire site be cleared for transfer to the State of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for an annex to the FMSP.” 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-education-to-cost ratio. Surface clearance is most compatible with a minimal-disturbance future land use, such as passive recreation (hiking, bird watching, nature photography, etc.) on protected parkland.

Options for the Conservation of Castner Range

A Conservation Conveyance was recently authorized by Congress which 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 nonprofit 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. A conservation conveyance allows Fort Bliss several options for conserving Castner Range:

1. Castner Range could be managed as a State Natural Area (SNA) and/or Wildlife Management Area (WMA). SNA protects outstanding examples of native landscape of natural communities, significant geological formations and archeological sites. WMA designation is used to conserve wildlife.
2. Castner Range could be developed for passive recreation such as camping, hiking, biking and sightseeing.
3. Sections of Castner Range could be cleaned up and transferred, when ready, to FMSP. In the meantime Fort Bliss could place the land under a Lease in Furtherance of Conveyance to ensure that all 7,081 acres of Castner Range are protected in perpetuity. The end result will be that all of Castner Range is transferred to TPWD.
4. Castner Range could remain part of Fort Bliss, which would continue to monitor trespassers, maintain fences, replace signage as needed, etc. The public would directly benefit by enjoying the views of Castner Range, and no disturbance would come to the existing wildlife corridors, the natural springs or the wildlife habitat.

Thanks to Fort Bliss

El Pasoans are grateful to the Army for its past 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.