

## Clearing Up the Army's "All or Nothing" Legacy at the Jefferson Proving Ground, Indiana

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Back in 1991, when I wrote *The U.S. Military's Toxic Legacy*, I selected the Jefferson Proving Ground, in southern Indiana, as a case study. In fact, it was from the civilian employees of the closing munitions range that I learned of the challenges posed by the millions of acres of land and sea across the U.S. contaminated by unexploded ordnance. I wrote:

The Army established JPG, a 55,264-acre finger of land jutting north from the Ohio River community of Madison, just before World War II. Though portions are used for the testing of aerial bombs and land mines, its primary function is to test artillery rounds, weapons designed to explode upon impact. While some of the early records are sketchy, the Army reports that **23 million rounds have been fired since 1941**. Approximately six percent have failed to explode; they lie as far as 25 feet underground. Those "duds," as well as nearly 5 million other potentially explosive devices, may be found anywhere on the 51,700 acres north of the base's firing line.

The Proving Ground officially closed in 1995. The following year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began managing the wildlife there. In 2000, it established the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (BONWR) on 50,000 acres above the firing line. Because of the contamination, the property was not transferred. Instead the Refuge operates under a 25-year overlay permit from the Army.

In many ways, the Refuge is like any other expanse of preserved habitat. On a brief recent ride through a small portion of Big Oaks, I saw snakes, deer, wild turkeys, and many other species of birds. The Refuge brochure describes the streams, wetlands, woods, and grasslands:



Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge Entry

“Over two hundred species of birds, 46 species of mammals, 24 species of amphibians, and 17 species of reptiles are found on the refuge.” It is a “Globally Important Bird Area.”

In the early 1990s, the Army estimated that it would cost \$5 billion to clear munitions sufficiently to permit unrestricted use. Though the Army has never produced a written document, someone there reportedly promulgated a policy that it would spend no money from the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) account clearing ordnance above the firing line. The Defense Department used small plots of land there to test geophysical survey equipment, and it did remove munitions from the smaller cantonment area below the firing line.

When it permitted the refuge, the Army instead promised that National Guard and Reserve explosive ordnance disposal units (EOD) would provide construction support and other limited clearance to enable public use of the refuge. It never happened. Such units have been deployed overseas, and they were never qualified to conduct the area clearance normally carried out by munitions response contractors. Nevertheless, the Army hides behind that agreement, as well as the never produced Army policy, whenever the refuge asks it to conduct any form of munitions response.



**Morgan Bridge**

In fact, this year Refuge officials had to turn back \$1.5 million in “Stimulus” money, intended to replace the Morgan Bridge and build a bunkhouse, because it could not ensure that there was no live ordnance in the construction zones.





### **Existing Refuge Headquarters**

More important, the Army refuses to provide construction support on the 100 acres upon which the Refuge wants to build a visitor center. Therefore, at the request of the non-profit Big Oaks Conservation Society, Congressman Baron Hill has requested a \$2 million Army Appropriation to clear the 100 acres to a depth of four feet and a \$5.75 million Interior Department Appropriation to build the visitor center, which would include “a visitor information center, exhibit space, multipurpose room, auditorium, classroom, public restrooms, sales area, and staff offices.” Existing Refuge offices, where all visitors undergo safety briefings before entry, are located several miles from the nearly 5,000-acre Day Use area in the northwest section of the Refuge. The new visitor center would provide direct entry to the Day Use area. Ironically, the 100-acre parcel includes a small plot where the Defense Department tested munitions response equipment and strategies.

The Society explains:

The Fish and Wildlife Service Staff (FWS), overseeing BONWR, has been housed in a temporary and inadequate Army-leased building for over nine years. Their work is hampered and public access is inordinately inconvenienced due to this arrangement. Without a proper office/public visitor complex, BONEW will be unable to reach its full potential as a catalyst for area economic activity and is, likewise, unable to provide the type of recreational and educational programs that are the proper purview of a National Wildlife Refuge. Until a proper office annex/visitor center is built, our refuge will remain underutilized and inefficient.



### **Site of Proposed Visitors' Center**

The proposed Army appropriation request would solve today's need, but it is a band-aid on an improper policy. Faced with the potential for a mythical budget-busting commitment to clear all the Refuge for unrestricted use, the Army promises nothing. Instead, it should commit BRAC or other environmental funds to whatever projects are necessary for the Refuge to fulfill its missions of protecting the environment—something the Army is not obligated to do because the Fish and Wildlife Service is on scene—and providing recreational and educational opportunities for the public.