

## Military life

# Green clothes, green minds

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## The Pentagon shows its softer side

THE hotel ballroom falls silent as the speaker gazes at his audience. He asks them to close their eyes and envision people who are less fortunate and live in a world without electricity. After a solemn pause, he says: "You're carrying the torch, so that your children and their children can have a better world to live in."

The speaker is not some New Age guru, but Ronald Johnson, a major-general in the Army Corps of Engineers, speaking to more than 300 local residents and soldiers at a sustainability conference at Fort Carson army base in Colorado Springs. Listening to him and other officers urging soldiers to become "environmental stewards" and to "lessen their ecological footprint" on the planet, you might imagine they worked for Greenpeace. In fact, they are only one sign of an unexpected shift. The army is also building more energy-efficient buildings, reducing hazardous air pollutants and getting more of its electric power from wind, biomass and other renewable sources.

Inevitably, money has something to do with it. The Department of Defence has been forced to spend billions of dollars to clean up toxic sites. But what began as sulky compliance with environmental laws has morphed into something more proactive. Fort Carson has invested in rain sensors for its irrigation systems which, it hopes, will save it \$80,000 a year; and it may save another \$30,000 annually from cleansing and recycling much of its hazardous paint-cleaning solvent, rather than paying to dispose of it.

Reducing the military's ecological footprint makes it "stealthier", claims Michael Cain, director of the army's Environmental Policy Institute. "It saves us money, provides mission support and it supports the environment," he adds. As an example, army engineers have slashed the amount of chromium, cadmium and other hazardous materials used in building Stryker combat tanks, which in turn reduces the health risk to soldiers. At the army engineering school in Missouri, officers are being taught the mysteries of building sheds with recycled wood, double-insulation walls and solar panels.

Greens still battling the Pentagon over the mess it has left across the country may well be sceptical, but progress has been made on the army's promise to meet various targets within 25 years. The Environmental Protection Agency has already declared Fort Lewis, in Washington state, clean enough not to need such frequent inspections. The air force is the largest federal purchaser of green power in the country: two of its bases are powered solely by renewable energy, mostly wind.

The Pentagon and environmental groups are even working together. For instance, various bits of the American armed forces have teamed up with the Nature Conservancy to buy land around their bases from ranchers. This gives soldiers more space in which to play their war games, but also means that thousands of acres of native habitat are saved from housing developments.