

2013 TEEA Winner Water Conservation Category: Fort Bliss National Cemetery, El Paso

Jaime Salome, Budget Analyst, Fort Bliss National Cemetery

We do about 1,350 services a year...

Narrator

Veteran and Fort Bliss National Cemetery employee Jaime Salome remembers when he used to march here as part of a Marine Corps Honor Guard.

Jaime Salome

The grass was pretty patchy. When we'd march out here, we'd leave with thorns in our dress uniforms.

Narrator

After fighting the region's desert environment for decades, in 2004, the Veteran's Administration began a five-year process of removing grass, adding native plants, and creating a gravel landscape.

Jaime Salome

You know, there was a lot of backlash. We had everything from death threats to being cursed out by old, angry ladies.

Ruben Baca, Landscaper, Fort Bliss National Cemetery

With our time and, uh, a lot of our work and you know what you see here, they appreciate it now. Now we're getting a lot more compliments.

Narrator

Ruben Baca, like many who work here, had a personal stake in the transformation.

Ruben Baca

I have a lot of family members here. Cousins, also my father, he was World War II era so, yeah.

Jaime Salome

I have an uncle and an aunt, and I also have friends that I served with in the Marine Corps interred here. I hope that I'm interred here some day. You know, I think it's a beautiful cemetery. No, it doesn't have, you know, the lush green grass, but that's not the environment we're in.

Narrator

The new landscape cut water use by 90%, or 56 million gallons a year. The plants are drought tolerant, the irrigation targeted through bubblers and a drip system. The gravel itself is groomed as meticulously as any golf course.

Scott Morrill, Foreman, Fort Bliss National Cemetery

We actually have these little vehicles with five rakes on it, so that takes away the tracks and leaves it like it's like nobody's been here.

Jaime Salome

It's very uniform, very clean, and I think people are coming around to it.

Ruben Baca

Almost all of us are veterans, so it's like veteran taking care of veteran. So we're proud of this place. It's very uh, how do I say... it's personal.