Fort Bliss National Cemetery

TEEA 2013 Winner: Water Conservation

Picture upright granite and marble headstones lined up in impeccable rows on rolling hills of perfectly maintained and trimmed lush green grass—this is the idyllic scene many envision when thinking of our national cemeteries honoring those that have served our nation.

But what if the final resting place for nearly 50,000 veterans receives a mere 7 inches of water each year in a state besieged with years of drought? The Fort Bliss National Cemetery in El Paso was struggling to maintain the distinctive perfect setting of a veterans' cemetery within its dry, desert climate. Despite using 62 million gallons of aquifer water each year, the cemetery still was plagued with golden brown patches of dead grass. Additionally, the cemetery's massive water usage caused concern because it draws its irrigation water from the Hueco Bolson Aquifer, an important drinking water source for El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, projected to run dry in as little as five years.

Cemetery officials' desire to better maintain the cemetery led to the idea of using native and drought-tolerant landscaping to replace the nearly 60 acres of turf grass. But their idea to transform the cemetery didn't come without initial concern from veteran groups and families uncomfortable with changing the traditional landscape. Education and perseverance helped relieve the uneasiness within the community, allowing officials to successfully convert to decomposed granite surfacing materials and drought-resistant plants, trees, and shrubs irrigated with an efficient system. Today, visitors walk through Fort Bliss National Cemetery and enjoy a serene and meticulously maintained landscape appropriate for a desert region. A different native plant is always in bloom each month and the fine-stone product covering grave sites is kept neat and undisturbed at all times.

The benefits of the project exceeded Fort Bliss' expectations and led to an estimated savings of $400,000 each year in water, energy, and maintenance costs. The cemetery has dropped water usage by 90 percent and energy use by 47 percent through reduced pumping, surpassing the

mandate for federal agencies to cut back water use 26 percent by 2020 and energy use 30 percent by 2015. These achievements won Fort Bliss National Cemetery the 2011 Department of Energy's Federal Water Management Award, which highlights federal governmental agencies that make significant contributions to energy and water efficiencies.

Fort Bliss National Cemetery is a model for national veteran cemeteries in a desert climate wanting to conserve water, while preserving the integrity and serenity of the final resting place for our nation's veterans.