

CASE STUDY:

BUILDING / ENHANCING SHOOTING RANGES WITH PR EXCISE TAX FUNDS



Alabama State Shooting Range: Cahaba



State Agency: Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources

Project/Range Name: Cahaba Shooting Range Improvement Project

Location: 3956 Coalmont Road, Helene, AL, 33 deg. 14" 49.00" N 86 deg. 54' 05.37" W.

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Shooting Range Website: [Cahaba River WMA Shooting Range | Outdoor Alabama](#)

Project Type: Update existing unstaffed range.

Total Project Cost: \$ 160,000

Breakdown of Total Project Cost:

PR Funds \$ 120,000

Agency Funds \$ 40,000

Annual Cost to Operate the Range: \$ 100,000

Project Timeline: 12-24 months

Range Usage: The range is located on a Wildlife Management Area, so hunters are a large user group, however recreational target shooters are becoming a larger user group for both pistols and rifles. Department sponsored Firearm 101 classes are held at this range and other departmental ranges.

Number of Shooting Lanes/Fields:

Six (6) – 100-yard lanes with covered shooting line and concrete benches, combination of movable paper target frames and steel

Five (5) – 50-yard lanes with covered shooting line and concrete benches, combination of movable paper target frames and steel

Four (4) – 50-yard lanes with covered shooting line and concrete benches, combination of movable paper target frames and steel

Intended Users: Rifle, handgun, and shotgun shooters

How is the Range Staffed: Four part-time Range Safety Officers, supervised by a Regional Hunter Education Coordinator

Funding Services: DCNR state fund and PR monies

Actual Time to Completion: The project took 12 months to bid on and construct for reopening, 24 months to complete.

Biggest Obstacles:

This project improved an existing range that had previously been unstaffed and open seven days a week during daylight hours. This was the first staffed shooting range for the department. Dumping, illegal targets and usage, berm deterioration, and loitering for illegal purposes were all prior issues.

The first obstacle was buy-in from current users. The staffed range would have less hours available for shooters due to set hours of operation. Staffing would also provide some degree of supervision and rule enforcement not previously experienced by the public. There was also concern about the lack of availability during construction.

A second obstacle was finding suitable employees to function as Range Safety Officers. This obstacle covered everything from state personnel hiring classifications and rules, benefits, pay, and other employee related considerations. Due to costs and ease, the decision was made to hire these employees as “Security Guards” at approximately \$12 per hour. Initially two part-time employees were hired and given vehicles. There was and is still no state job classification covering the duties of RSO.

This range is located on leased land without availability of utilities such as power and water. This obstacle affected everything from construction, user comfort, and recruitment of RSOs.

A final and ongoing obstacle is finding suitable target stands, holders, steel targets and stands and items of that nature. There are no perfect designs and working under the constraints of state purchasing and finding suitable vendors are a concern. State purchasing rules can be difficult to navigate and some specialty companies do not want the aggravation. The availability of certain products, customized designs, and variety of materials are an ongoing issue.

How Were Those Obstacles Overcome?

Two community meetings were held to explain the project and the expected benefits. Employees also met with target shooters at the range periodically to discuss the project. Many potential and former users expressed gratitude at the project due to concerns for safety and maintenance at the unstaffed range. The range had become a place for dumping and unsafe behavior and that is one reason the decision was made to undertake this project. Once the benefits were explained and assurances made that it would be better than before, the community became more accepting of the project. I now often hear compliments of how much safer and cleaner it is and more welcoming since the improvement project.

Hiring good staff was a problem early on and still is one of the most constant obstacles to success at all staffed ranges. Salary comparisons with other states are underway and efforts to increase the starting pay for RSOs have begun. The best employees we have found so far are retired individuals who enjoy shooting and working with the public. We have had some success with college students and even had one young graduate who became an RSO and then worked himself into becoming a Conservation Officer. This range is near a large population center, so the labor pool is a little better than at other ranges where staffing has been an even greater problem.

What portion of the project took more time than expected?

Internal state purchasing, contract awarding, and legal issues, along with the usual permitting and NEPA compliance were the initial time sinks. Once the construction contract was awarded the contractor was timely. The range was shut down for less than six months. Once the berms and shooting lines were complete, we opened with one portable toilet and the RSOs working out of their vehicles. Over the next year, improvements were made to the parking lot, landscaping and a small RSO office was built.

What Range Development Resources Were Most Helpful?

Reference guides on berm construction and specifications were utilized and helpful to construct a proper range and to minimize liability concerns. Consultation with other State Coordinators and people with experience were consulted to provide input to the professional engineers who developed the final designs.

What Information/Knowledge Do You Know Now That You Wish Knew Earlier?

To always go bigger and better when it comes to range construction. The popularity of shooting as a sport and the continued interest from traditional shooters like hunters, law enforcement, and military will continue to grow. We still do not have enough capacity on

most weekends. Future range construction will include electronic targets and more steel to encourage more shooting and less target maintenance.

What Additional Resources Would Have Made the Task Easier/Cheaper/Quicker?

Reports and case studies such as these are valuable tools. The ability to then reach out to these individuals and discuss real world issues and ideas is a valuable tool. Also knowing we are all on the same team and in the same boat when it comes to dealing with local, state, and federal agencies, public user groups, coupled with political ideologies.

For additional information on Alabama DCNR shooting ranges, visit:

<https://www.outdooralabama.com/activities/shooting-ranges>

