

STENNIS SPACE CENTER
BUFFER ZONE

I. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

At the time Stennis Space Center (SSC) was established in the 1960s, the United States Government purchased approximately 13,800 acres in fee simple (often referred to as the “Fee Area” in the shape of roughly a five mile square) to establish a facility for testing the large Saturn V launch vehicle stages and engines used for the Apollo program. The Government also purchased a perpetual restrictive easement in approximately 125,000 acres of land, commonly referred to as the “buffer zone,” surrounding the test facility and extending about six miles in all directions. The easement was acquired for the purpose of ensuring the ability to test large rocket engines at any time without concern that the vibration and noise from such tests might damage or otherwise impact nearby structures or populations.

Today, SSC is known as the nation’s center of excellence for testing large rocket systems. The Space Shuttle’s main engines are tested and certified for flight at SSC before every Shuttle mission, and other Government and commercial test programs are conducted at SSC. The buffer zone is a national asset, which assures that SSC’s testing mission will continue indefinitely. It provides a capability not available elsewhere to test large propulsion systems and, for that reason, SSC is able to attract commercial and Government test programs.

In addition, the buffer zone offers a unique environment for several defense-related missions of other resident agencies located at SSC. In studies of SSC’s economic impact on the local area, it has been established that SSC has a profound beneficial economic impact on the surrounding area in both Mississippi and Louisiana. The majority of the buffer zone is located in Hancock County, Mississippi but it also extends into Pearl River County, Mississippi and St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.

Although most of the buffer zone is privately owned, the area is uninhabited because the Government’s easement prohibits habitable structures, including mobile homes, campers, trailers or other enclosed structures. However, the easement does not prohibit landowners from using lands within the buffer zone for activities that do not violate the easement restriction, such as timber production, grazing, haying, agriculture, fishing ponds, mineral extraction, and recreational activities.

At the time the Government acquired its interest in the buffer zone, some individual landowners were given the option to either receive payment for selling the restrictive easement or to sell the Government full title to their land. Ultimately, landowners collectively conveyed about 6,800 acres in fee simple (e.g. in its entirety) to NASA, while the majority of the buffer zone remained privately owned but encumbered with the restrictive easement.

In order to maintain the integrity of the buffer zone, which is so integral to SSC's success and continued viability as a test center, NASA has for over 30 years utilized the services of the Army Corps of Engineers in Mobile, Alabama, as its land management agent. The Corps provides assistance to ensure compliance with the Government's restrictive easement. NASA also uses support contractors and local law enforcement agencies to patrol the buffer zone and report violations of the restrictive easement, such as the construction of habitable structures or occupancy of campers and/or tents.

NASA has entered into "consent agreements" that allow buildings or structures within the buffer zone only in instances where it has been demonstrated that such facilities will serve a general public interest or need, such as in the case of the State of Mississippi's Welcome Center and truck weigh stations on Interstate 10. A consent agreement between NASA and the Pearl River Basin Development District allows temporary camping for the public benefit at McLeod Water Park. The agreement permits transient camping at the Park for a period not to exceed 14 consecutive days. The property for McLeod Water Park was conveyed to the State of Mississippi by NASA during the 1970s as part of the President's Legacy of Parks program.

II. RESTRICTIVE EASEMENT ESTATE

The 125,000 acres which comprise the SSC buffer zone are encumbered by a perpetual easement estate owned by the Government consisting of:

a. Human Dwellings

- the right to prohibit human habitation or human occupancy of dwellings and other buildings,
- the right to prohibit the construction of dwellings and other buildings susceptible of being used for human habitation or human occupancy;
- together with all right, title, and interest (except as listed hereinafter) in and to the dwellings and other buildings now situated on the land and which are susceptible of being used for human habitation or human occupancy,
- including the right to demolish, remove, relocate, or leave in place said dwellings and other buildings;

b. Signs

- the right to post signs indicating the nature and extent of the Government's control;

c. Access

- the right of ingress and egress over and across said land for the purpose of exercising the rights set forth herein; subject, however, to existing easements for public roads and highways, public utilities, railroads and pipelines:
- reserving, however to successors, and assigns all right, title, interest, and privilege as may be used and enjoyed without interfering with or abridging the rights, title, and interest hereby taken for said public uses.

III. COMPATIBLE USES

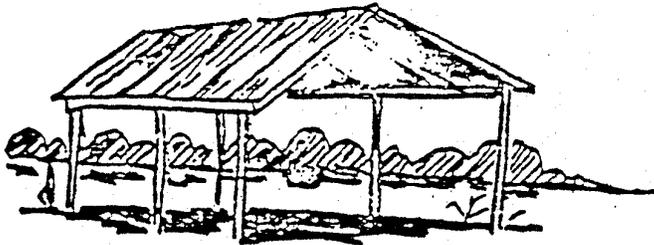
Buffer zone landowners who retained fee interest may use their land for any purpose consistent with the Government's perpetual and restrictive easement interest. Examples of such use are:

1. Recreation
2. Timber Production
3. Grazing
4. Haying
5. Agriculture
6. Sale of Borrow Material
7. Fishing Pond
8. Mineral Excavation (including sand and gravel)

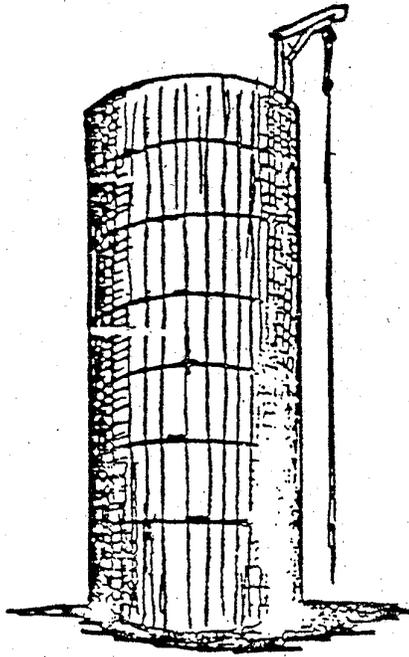
The landowner may also construct improvements or use equipment in support of the listed uses, as long as they are not susceptible of being used for human habitation or occupancy. Therefore, no roofed structure with sides is allowed. Structures such as carports, picnic shelters, or sheds must be open on all four sides. Examples of allowable structures and equipment are:

1. Open-sided picnic shelters or carports
2. Silos
3. Drilling Rig
4. Storage Tanks
5. Fencing
6. Covered patio
7. Grain elevators
8. Barges (in support of mineral excavation)

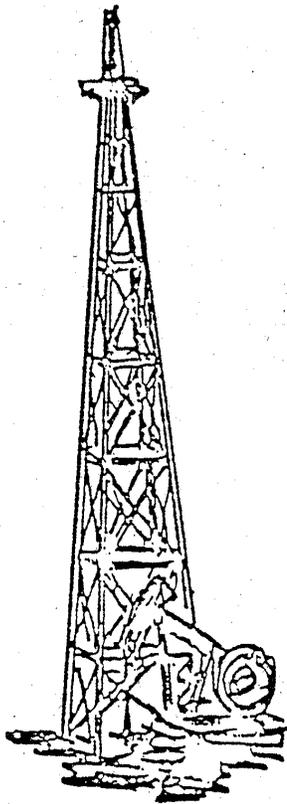
These sketches illustrate the general types of allowable structures:



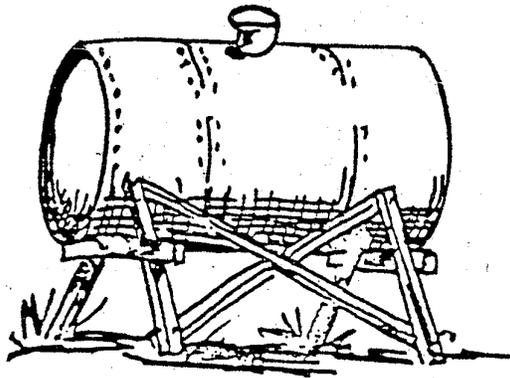
Open sided roofed structures may be used as patios, carports, sheds, barns or for any other use this type structure is suited for.



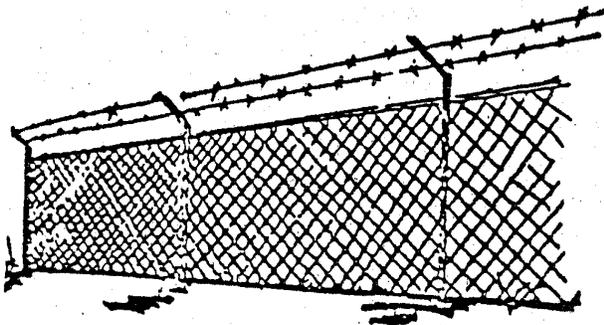
Silo or grain elevator.



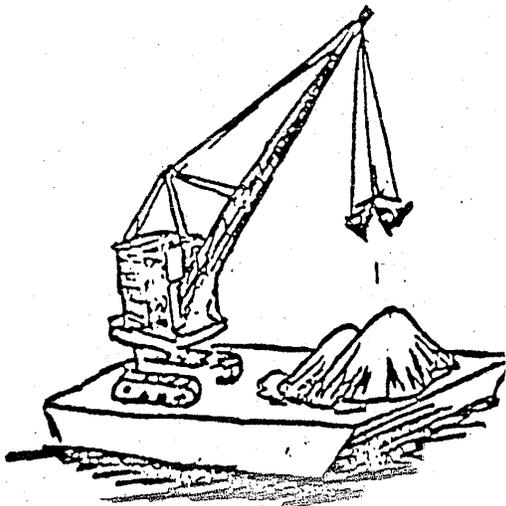
Rigs for mineral exploration will be permitted under mineral rights, which for the most part remain outstanding in the Buffer Zone. Location of buildings or trailers at the exploration site which are susceptible to human habitation are not permitted.



Storage tanks or various types and sizes are permitted, either upright or supported horizontal.



Metal or wood fencing is permitted.



Barges will be permitted, provided they are not equipped with quarters susceptible to human habitation or occupancy. Cabs housing operators and equipment must be modified to conform to the restrictive estate.