



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**

**Public Affairs Office
Honolulu District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Fort Shafter, Hawaii 96858-5440**

**Contact: Lacey Justinger
808-438-9862
or Joseph Bonfiglio
808-438-8317**

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers helps recovery effort after tsunami in American Samoa

By Lacey Justinger, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 27-09) The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Honolulu District, in coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), continues to deploy personnel and provide support to the people of American Samoa in the aftermath of the Sept. 29 tsunami.

“Our teammates in American Samoa are having a significantly positive impact in support of FEMA, the people of Samoa, and the territorial leadership,” said Maj. John Henderson, deputy commander for the USACE, Honolulu District. “American Samoa Governor Tulafono and Congressman Faleomavaega have expressed their sincere gratitude for all that we are doing for American Samoa.”

The District currently has six subject-matter-experts and 18 Soldiers from B Company, 249th Prime Power Engineer Battalion deployed in American Samoa. The District Headquarters is facilitating project management, logistical, contracting, operations, personnel and funding support from Honolulu to the Soldiers and Civilians on the ground in Samoa.

“In this emergency, our friends need help and the federal government, including FEMA and the Corps of Engineers, has responded aggressively,” said Brig. Gen. Mark W. Yenter, commander of the USACE, Pacific Ocean Division. “I am very proud of the support our federal employees and Soldiers have provided. We have a long way to go and we will get there together.”

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Samoa 2-2-2

The Corps of Engineers is executing emergency power missions, constructing temporary structures to serve as interim schools, conducting damage assessments on federal projects and providing technical assistance for debris removal, temporary housing, and water / wastewater. “Our team on the ground is experiencing the great rewards that come from selfless service to those who need it the most,” said Henderson.

The Honolulu District water /wastewater subject-matter-expert, Michael Wong, who recently returned from Samoa, said that with the help of the supplemented power, all connected customers on the island had safe drinking water within one week of the disaster.

The Corps has been and will continue to provide emergency power support until the American Samoa Power Authority (ASPA) can stabilize the grid and restore power generation capacity. The Satala Power Plant, one of the two power stations on the island of Tutuila, was severely damaged in the tsunami and is not operational. The Tafuna Power Plant is running at full capacity but under the threat of full system overload and failure.

To relieve some of the stress to the Tafuna power station, the Soldiers of the 249th Engineer Battalion installed 46 generators and four transformers of various sizes in several locations to generate nine mega-watts of power for island usage. Most of the generator sets were installed directly on to the grid, which is not a traditional mission for the 249th and is considerably more dangerous.

“This is a rare task for the Corps to support the whole power system and augment the power station grid,” said Cindy Barger, a mission manager for the Honolulu District Power Planning and Response Team (PRT). “Usually the Power PRT installs smaller individual generators at essential public facilities like hospitals, emergency management centers, and water or waste water pump stations.”

“We are confronting new challenges everyday, but we work to resolve them in new ways,” said Don Schlack, a Honolulu District Power PRT subject-matter-expert currently deployed to Samoa. “We are supplying communities with power that otherwise would be blacked out.”

FEMA also has tasked the Corps with constructing 12 buildings to serve as five temporary schools in communities that were heavily damaged or destroyed in the tsunami. Construction of these facilities is expected to be complete by Dec. 15th.

“This will allow the community to get the kids back in school and continue the road to recovery,” said Joel Hendrix, emergency management division chief for the Honolulu District.

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Samoa 3-3-3

The Honolulu District is establishing a temporary project office in Samoa to execute current FEMA mission assignments and any future missions that are assigned in support of the American Samoa recovery effort. The American Samoan government and FEMA continue to work together on the best plan for a full recovery.

“Make no mistake about it, the government and the people of American Samoa are in charge of this recovery,” said Yenter. “The Pacific Ocean Division and the Honolulu District have worked closely with the Government of the Territory of American Samoa for many decades. Their pride in community service and teamwork is inspiring. I know American Samoa will recover from this tragedy and be stronger than ever.”

USACE personnel and 249th Prime Power Soldiers have consistently been working 13 to 15 hour days since their deployment to Samoa with unreliable and sporadic communications and severe weather conditions.

“This has been a great team effort,” said Hendrix. “Everyone coordinated so we could combine and focus our efforts on the small footprint of man-power downrange.”

An Independent Assistance and Assessment Team from the USACE headquarters is in Honolulu this week to review the response effort on a corporate level and to prepare for the Corps’ next natural emergency response mission.

The USACE priorities in disaster response are supporting the immediate emergency response requirements; sustaining lives with critical commodities and temporary emergency power; and initiating recovery efforts by assessing and restoring critical infrastructure.

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