

Katrina Clean Up

Chain saws, tangled storm debris and fallen timber, heavy machinery, high-speed traffic, steep roofs and workers toiling long hours in unfamiliar territory could be a recipe for serious injury or death. **Story by Grant Sattler**

That is why preventing accidents is Job 1 for eight safety officers deployed to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Task Force Hope – Mississippi.

By communicating required safety measures and observing field operations, safety officers are doing all they can to prevent mishaps in the Corps' FEMA-assigned missions for temporary roofing, debris removal, and set up of temporary public structures and temporary housing.

"We're keeping the prime contractors and subcontractors operating in a safe manner," said Tom Knapp, safety officer covering Corps operations in six counties from the Emergency Field Office North in Hattiesburg, Miss. "When we see a violation, we correct it on the spot. But it's really about teaching. Educating the subcontractors about standards."

Safety Officer Jim Moore, also working from EFO North, said the Corps is taking a team-building approach. "Our charge from Vicksburg District was that we aren't here to shut people down for safety violations," he said. "We are here to help people work safely."

But if the same problems continue to crop up, or represent

an immediate life risk, operations are stopped, corrections are made and safety training occurs before work is allowed to resume, Moore said.

Most safety problems are not deliberate noncompliance, said Knapp, deployed from Sacramento District after recently returning from Iraq. Rather, "... it's a lack of training. A lot of the subcontractors really haven't done this type of work before," he said. "In most cases they are very receptive to corrections."

Hurricane recovery operations across southern Mississippi are not routine for many Corps employees either, explained Dave Stanton, TF Hope – Mississippi Safety Manager from the Recovery Field Office at Keesler AFB, Biloxi.

"Back at home station, if you're a military district or civil works, ... there are people familiar with our Corps safety requirements and so things run pretty smoothly," he said. "Here,

we've got hundreds of QAs — in debris disposal site towers, out at the pick up points — from not just the Corps, but other Federal agencies." QAs working in TF Hope – Mississippi include employees from the Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and even contractors hired to represent the government.

"One of our challenges is to give them some basic training because the hazards are the same as a lot of construction sites where you've got moving equipment," Stanton said. Stanton is deployed from Europe District, Wiesbaden, Germany.

Moore agreed that for those without a construction background it is a new experience with lots of new hazards.

Moore, who is deployed from Omaha District, said the biggest danger now is complacency.

"We've performed all this work and nobody's died, therefore one might say we must be doing something right. Or does it just

"When we see a violation, we correct it on the spot."

mean we haven't gotten caught yet?" he said. "As operations go on longer we tend to become more complacent."

Stanton agreed. "We're out of the emergency response mode and we're in the recovery mode, so we are ratcheting up our efforts on safety because people are into that 'now things are running smoothly' attitude." Stanton said operations continue to be hazardous, especially working around public roadways, something most Corps employees do not routinely do. "Like traffic control, for example," he said. "We're worried that crews are going to get complacent and aren't going to have flaggers out where they're supposed to be."

Moore said all federal agencies that have come to southern Mississippi to support hurricane relief have teamed together to support a safe recovery operation. Participants at regular meetings include FEMA, OSHA, the Operation Blue Roof and Debris mission managers, and Corps Resident Engineers.

While it has strong command emphasis, to be effective a safety plan has to be implemented at all levels.

"Every person is a safety officer," Moore said. "Our QAs are primarily in place to ensure that the government specifications of the contract are met, but every set of eyes ... has a safety role."

But it is not just contractor workers who are at risk.

"FEMA and the Corps are doing very well protecting their own," Knapp said. "The required six hours off gives a needed break." Corps personnel are working a seven-day, 12-hour schedule but must take six hours off out of that schedule each week. Moore said, "A profit motive will cause people to work longer hours than sometimes they should, so the Vicksburg District commander has dictated downtime each week."

Another hazard is exacerbated by the high number of miles Corps employees are driving daily to accomplish their missions.

"We don't practice defensive driving; we drive scared," Stanton said. "There are still stoplights and stop signs missing, but even where they've been replaced, people may not notice."

Safety officers are among those traveling Mississippi highways, regularly visiting more than 28 debris reduction sites, observing debris crews in operation, and checking facilities. Moore has averaged more than 5,000 miles each month he has been deployed. Most of the deployed safety personnel have extended beyond the initial 30 days, he said.

Stanton said, "We have a long way to go, a lot of work in front of us. We need volunteers. We're in Afghanistan, we're in Iraq, and all over the world doing great work, but here we're taking care of our own."

◀ **David Stanton, Europe District, and others, compose a team of safety personnel who are working to keep employees, contractors and the local populous safe.**

▼ **The Mississippi coast is tattered with a tangled web of debris. Corps' safety personnel are ensuring that restoration operations run smoothly as Corps employees help restore miles of destruction.**



Photo by Mark Wingate



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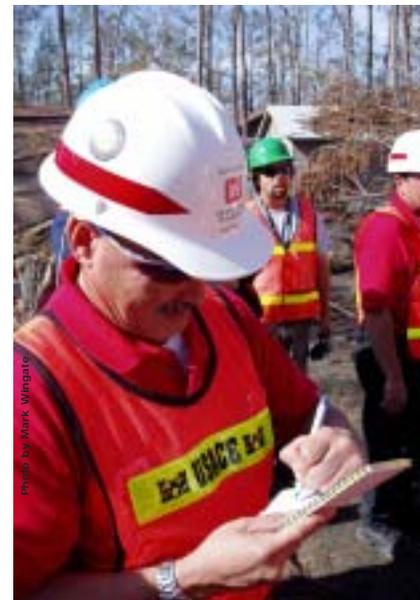


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