

## **NEWS RELEASE**

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### *Corps overcomes huge hurdles*

## **New Orleans begins to see results of recovery operations**

NEW ORLEANS, LA. - Working 24-7 operations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is making giant steps toward unwatering New Orleans and surrounding areas. In many locations, water is receding at least a foot per day.

On Sept. 10, the New Orleans District closed off the fourth and final critical breach in the Orleans and East Orleans areas. That success was cheered, but only for a moment as project leaders then began focusing on their next goals.

### **Attacking breaches by land, air and waterway.**

Non-stop convoys of twenty-ton trucks delivered sand, gravel and large rock to areas on the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal where access roads had to be built to the breach there. The road was then forked from that location and built to reach the London Avenue Canal breach. From the London Avenue west side breach, the road is still being built today to the second breach area at Mirabeau Road. Corps contractors averaged building about 500 feet of roadway per day.

The next step at the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal, and later followed at the London Avenue Canal, was to cut off flow from Lake Pontchartrain into the canal. Corps contractors drove 150 feet of steel piling across the canal to seal it.

Meanwhile, Texas Army National Guard Chinook and Blackhawk helicopter crews placed an average of 600 7,000-pound sandbags each day into the breaches. Depending on the helicopters lift capability, Corps riggers averaged one to three hookups every two minutes during daylight hours. Sandbagging operations ran 24 hours for ten days and, with the breaches complete, were halted Sept. 10. Several crane barges were also used to place sandbags and gravel, and other barges were used to haul equipment, pumps, generators and people to sites.

“We did everything we could do to bring in the right equipment, materials and resources to expedite these breach closures,” said Col. Richard P. Wagenaar, New Orleans District commander.

“I’m proud of these people. They’ve lost a lot, some of them are without homes themselves, but they’re putting their hearts into this mission and exceeding my expectations,” he said. “I can’t say enough about their dedication and determination.”

### **Shift in mission focus.**

Though the mission of repairing pumping stations and ordering and placing auxiliary pumps was an ongoing operation, on Sept. 8 it became the primary focus. Wagenaar’s goal all along was to have pumping operations begin as soon as the breaches were closed. And they did. Unwatering began at the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal site Sept. 5 and at the London Canal location Sept. 10.

The Corps concentrated its portable pumps and generators at canal locations to support the unwatering of organic pumps in the southern areas of the water basins. With the canals leading to the pump stations unwatered, the Corps, contractors and local water board authorities are able to get in to repair the organic pumps that were under water or otherwise crippled by Hurricane Katrina. Entergy has also been working with authorities here to provide electricity to specific pump station grids. As canal waters are lowered and more power is restored, more pump stations are becoming operational.

There are 148 organic pumps in the New Orleans area that are being worked. On Sept. 10, an average of 26 pumps were operating, pumping 9,125 cubic feet per second (cfs) and 39 portable pumps were operating, pumping 723 cfs. In addition, nine of 26 existing pumps in Plaquemines Parish reported operating at 1,360 cfs.

As of midnight Sept. 11, three-quarters of a billion gallons of water was being drained - or, the equivalent to an Olympic-sized swimming pool every two seconds.

Corps officials say that as a result of improved pumping capacity and efficiency, additional pumps, intentional breaches in the levee system and better field data and hydrological modeling, they have refined the amount of time it will take to complete the unwatering. Current estimates now range from early- to mid-October.

Corps officials say it’s important to understand that the unwatering will remove most, but not all the water. The city’s storm sewer system is clogged and this means pockets of water will remain. The Corps plans to place small pumps at these locations to remove the remaining water, and don’t expect the isolated pockets to hamper recovery and reconstruction effort.

Once unwatering is complete, several critical processes need to take place, including debris removal, structural assessments and restoration of critical utilities.

### **Pumping Water into Lake Ponchartrain**

Everyone is concerned about the quality of water being moved from New Orleans to Lake Ponchartrain, but the Corps first priority is the health and safety of residents of New Orleans and all responders. The Corps is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ensure human health and safety as the water is drained, and

have received approval from EPA to move the water following the agency's normal practices in emergencies. The EPA is monitoring and testing the water. Corps personnel have already encountered situations in which additional measures were necessary and worked with EPA officials to resolve the issue.

During and after disasters, the Corps of Engineers victim district team concept is often put into place. The Corps' Memphis District, Tenn., will take over many of the normal duties of New Orleans while that district reconstitutes itself. A team from the Corps' Rock Island District, led by Col. Duane Gapinski, has been on the ground in New Orleans since Sept. 8 and as of Sept. 10 has assumed the unwatering mission. Among other things, this move will allow Wagenaar to reconstitute the New Orleans District. Nearly all of the 1,200 district employees are accounted for and now must get back to the numerous tasks ahead of them as a result of Katrina.

"We're moving ahead with the senior team to reconstitute the district, to prepare support for southeast Louisiana and New Orleans recovery projects, and to execute our civil works program. I expect that over the next two weeks we will begin to pull more district personnel into the fight. This is a long-term fight that must be sustained," Wagenaar said.

With so many employees affected by the aftermath of Katrina, the commander emphasized that employees' first priority is to their families and making sure that their personal affairs are taken care of.

"This is the most important thing they can focus on right now. I'll try to get them into the fight if they want to be here," he said.

In assuming the unwatering mission, Gapinski absorbed about 40 New Orleans District employees currently working unwatering projects along with his home-district crew of seven. Four members of the Corps' Contingency Response Unit, U.S. Army Reserve, were also called to active duty to support the unwatering mission.

A contingency of engineers from across the nation is supporting recovery efforts such as debris removal, Operation Blue Roof, delivery of water and ice, and other missions, in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.