

Camp Pendleton Marines Plan Earthquake Response

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By Alison St John

The Marine Corps is using its experience in training for crises overseas to launch training for a disaster closer to home. The Corps brought to Camp Pendleton leaders of the U.S. Marines' Northern Command who were involved with Hurricane Sandy Relief on the East Coast last year.

Gen. John Toolan, commander of the First Expeditionary Force based at Camp Pendleton, said, under the constitution, the military cannot take action until it is asked for help by civilian agencies. But, he said, the Corps wants to be ready if - or rather when - that call comes.

“We’re pretty proficient when it comes to handling international disasters,” Toolan said, “Many of the people here today were in Operation Tomodachi in Japan during the tsunami, so we’re good at it and we know what we’re doing. But when we talk about inside our own country, we have the expertise, we just want to make sure we know who to call, who to talk to.”



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Three Marines in the 7th Engineer Support Brigade beside a D7 Bulldozer, one of the pieces of heavy earth moving equipment

During the 2007 wildfires in San Diego County, the Marines took days to respond to requests for help from firefighting helicopters, although the Navy was quicker to respond. This week’s meeting at Camp Pendleton aims to clarify chains of command and build relationships.

“We’re here looking at earthquakes and things that could happen in an unexpected way,” Toolan said, “so we have to be able to move quick.”

The training scenario participants will focus on Thursday is a 7.9 earthquake centered in Bombay Beach. That’s about 100 miles east of San Diego on the other side of the Salton Sea. It’s located near the base of the San Andreas Fault and close to the epicenter of earthquakes that have rattled Imperial County in recent years.



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Marines say this water purification system is capable of generating more than 1,000 gallons of fresh water an hour from un-purified or contaminated fresh water, and somewhat less from salt sea water. The water is collected in the deflated tank on the right of the picture. March 2013

The training simulation adds another 7.9 jolt centered in San Francisco Bay. The scenario describes 1,800 fatalities as a result of the quake up the 300 mile fault line, with more than 50,000 injuries. According to the simulation, roads cross the fault line in 900 places, while power lines cross it almost 150 times, resulting in heavy damage, a complete loss of power to Los Angeles and Riverside, and flooding from major reservoirs.

The scenario begins with the flow of information from local and state emergency agencies to federal agencies as information is collected. A second scenario gives participants a chance to explore what they would do 24 hours after the earthquake has struck.

Outside the meeting hall, Marines demonstrated earth-moving equipment, water purification systems and giant generators used to power mobile emergency rooms.

The Corps has 24 large water purification systems which, according to the operator, are capable of producing 36,000 gallons of fresh water in 24 hours from unpurified fresh water sources. Each unit can produce about 1,100 gallons an hour. The generators, which run on diesel, can be used to set up an independent grid that could be used to power a hospital.



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The Marines train to operate in mobile emergency medical tents, that can be powered by giant generators. March 2013

Tim Russell, the emergency coordinator from the Marines' Northern Command, warned that it could be 24, 48 or 96 hours before the military can mobilize resources, depending on the nature of the disaster and the speed of communication from local to national levels, and back down the chain of command.

Russell indicated that the Department of Defense has to consider issues like risk, cost and readiness, before deciding if a request for help for a domestic disaster could affect the military's primary mission of defending the nation.

Representatives from California's Emergency Management Agency were on the participant list, as well as representatives from Emergency Operations Centers in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. Reps from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Department of Defense were also invited.