



Mock RIF hints at what may lie ahead

By Curt Biberdorf
Public Affairs Office

After conducting a mock reduction in force, a signed letter by the commander will be delivered in January to employees who currently



Photo by Curt Biberdorf

Col. Christopher Lestochi, district commander, listens to an employee's question during a town hall meeting at the JBER-Elmendorf theater Nov. 26.

would be separated by a potential RIF, said Col. Christopher Lestochi, district commander, in his first town hall meeting Nov. 26 with the work force since taking command in July.

The mock RIF is preparation for the district's request for authorization to execute a RIF in October of Fiscal Year 2014, if necessary.

This action will inform employees most likely to be separated and encourage them to explore employment opportunities both with the Corps and elsewhere, Lestochi said.

The Civilian Personnel Advisory Center will conduct the mock RIF, creating a list after reviewing employee records and examining positions recommended for abolishment.

"These people are most at risk of being separated under a RIF," Lestochi said. "It's a snapshot of time. If you run the RIF today, you get one result. If you run it next week—somebody retires or leaves unexpectedly—you get a completely different result."

Employees identified for separation under the mock RIF can use the USACE Command Special Assistance Initiative and Pacific Ocean Division Regional

Employee Placement Program to receive help in finding another job within the Corps.

Lestochi chose to implement the mock RIF now to allow the "widest number of people the greatest amount of time" to take advantage of these programs.

RIF authority takes at least 200 days to approve because the request needs to pass through USACE Headquarters, Department of the Army, Department of Defense and Congress.

Initially, the district asked for authorization to conduct a RIF in FY2013, and completed a mock RIF last June, but the request stopped at USACE Headquarters because the district's financial situation improved for FY2013. The district successfully cut costs and increased income, and most likely will not need a RIF this fiscal year.

In the worst-case scenario for FY2014, the district cannot afford 57 employees and needs increased attrition, more income or both to maintain a balanced budget as a project-funded organization. Even viewing the

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Priorities discussed at town hall meeting

By Curt Biberdorf
Public Affairs Office

Col. Christopher Lestochi, district commander, discussed his leadership style, philosophy and priorities during his first town hall meeting Nov. 26.

Nearly five months into his second tour at the district, he shared his assessment of the district after meeting with employees, customers, stakeholders and senior leaders. A common theme emerged to characterize the people in the district.

"What I see in our work force as a whole are people who are pioneering, adaptable and flexible, that are really willing to do the hard things. I hear this over and over from folks," Lestochi said.

While serving in Afghanistan, he noticed a large number of people deployed from the Alaska District. Whether it's in the Middle East, the Pacific region or here, customers are continually impressed and surprised with the district's

performance, he said.

"As we go through (changes in the district), it's very important that we hang onto that idea of being flexible and adaptable that has served us so well," Lestochi said.

Despite downsizing and shifting workload, he stressed the importance of executing the mission and not worrying about the future. This is especially important as potential customers can choose another agency to manage their projects.

"If we continue to focus and continue to be successful, we'll get more work," Lestochi said.

He emphasized the importance of finding ways to cut costs, and stressed the need to learn how to operate effectively and efficiently. Work force reshaping was another key point.

"I have to make sure we have the right work force for the mission we are going to have, not the one we want to have or the one we used to have," Lestochi said.

The district can control its destiny with the right combination of cost containment and income generation.

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Town hall

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If a reduction in force is necessary, it will happen, but only as a last resort, he said.

Guidance

Lestochi strives to achieve a higher standard. It's why in his youth as a Boy Scout, he sought and earned the rank of Eagle Scout. It was the first program that taught him about seeking excellence.

"Whatever you hope to do day-to-day, you should aspire to be the best at it," he said.

Everyone has enormous potential, and Lestochi vowed to help everyone to realize that as much as possible.

He talked about the value and importance of team over individual performance, especially in difficult circumstances. He added that following the "golden rule" is the way to avoid conflict most of the time.

Lestochi said he trusts the work force expertise and advice he receives unless he has some reason to believe otherwise. Micromanaging is not his style, but he can do it if necessary.

"When you let the people who are actually executing the tasks come up with a solution, you have a far better outcome than when people dictate how we are going to do things," he said.

Don't expect change from him for no particular reason. Mistakes will happen, but are tolerated as long as they are not repeated. Just as important as sharing with him the good news is keeping him informed of the bad.

"If something is not working out right, you need to let people know," Lestochi said. "If you want me to go down in the plane with you, you got to let me know early on before things spin out of control."

He prefers to communicate in person, over the phone and via email in that order. Lestochi will read all of his messages but can't possibly reply to each one. However, he will respond in some format to every message sent to

the commander's virtual open door on the employee intranet when a response is expected.

Even in tough times, Lestochi hopes people remember to have fun at work.

"If you really are not happy with what you're doing, I'm going to tell you to go find something else to do," he said.

Priorities

Lestochi spent some time describing how the district relates to the priorities set by Lt. Gen. Thomas Bostick, USACE commanding general.

In protecting and defending our nation, the Alaska District has the lead role for setting conditions with nations in the Pacific and Asia so that the government has access there in case of a national emergency, Lestochi said.

"(If) you look at where we have a U.S. presence (in the U.S. Pacific Command's area of responsibility), in some of those places the only presence is the Alaska District," he said.

The second priority for Bostick is civil works transformation, and Lestochi said the district needs to continue to advance water resource projects as much as possible and be ready to execute if funding becomes available.

Bostick's third priority is to build the Corps for the future. That means retaining and developing the right people along with partnering with other agencies and stakeholders, he said.

At Pacific Ocean Division, Brig. Gen. Richard Stevens identified four enduring principles that guide mission execution: trusted engineering, service excellence, measurable performance and work force fulfillment.

District priorities are evolving. They are to execute the program safely, be prepared for contingency operations, build customer relations, develop nontraditional methods and customers, implement civil works transformation and deliver energy sustainability.

Energy sustainability is a growth area, and Lestochi believes the work force has the ability to develop it into a business line.

Going forward, the district has huge potential with programs such as humanitarian assistance and foreign military sales. However, the customer has choices on who will do the work, the projects are smaller and funding is less predictable.

He also stressed the importance of being an ambassador for the district because it generates positive results.

"A reason why we are enjoying success and growth in some of these areas is not because somebody told us we had to do it," Lestochi said. "It was because people like you were out there talking to people who make those types of decisions."

He doubts that the C-17 aircraft beddown project in India would have happened without the success of humanitarian assistance. Many more opportunities are available.

Opportunities

Besides employees filling job vacancies or taking temporary duty assignments in Japan and Korea to help execute multi-billion dollar construction programs over the next three to four years, the district is looking at ways to bring some of that work to Alaska. Korea is already sending some design jobs, and Lestochi thinks similar opportunities are available from Japan.

"It's not going to solve our (income) problems, but it's going to help," he said. "The other commanders are aware of this and are anxious to take advantage of your experience here."

Back in Alaska, the Regulatory Division's workload is increasing significantly, and their services are going to be in greater demand.

Change brings opportunities. Those who adapt will thrive while those who resist or cannot adapt will have a tough time, he said.

GOLD NUGGETS

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Mock RIF

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best situation, the district appears to be underfunded. The two subsequent years are harder to predict.

“The outyears are a little bit more fuzzy,” Lestochi said. “Even if we make it through FY2014 (without a RIF), we are going to be facing a similar situation probably in FY2015-2016.”

As time passes, the district will have a better idea of what to expect. Toward the end of last fiscal year, workload numbers were changing daily, he said.

The downsizing outlook is in part a ripple effect from what is happening nationally.

Persistent federal deficit spending and mounting national debt are bringing pressure for reductions that include cuts to the Department of Defense. It has been the district’s largest and most reliable customer with Army and Air Force projects constructed during a surge of funding in the last decade. Furthermore, a steady stream of civil works funding also is affected as Congress halted new projects in order to re-evaluate spending priorities.

“If you look at our military construction program, there’s not much going forward,” Lestochi said. “It may change a little bit, but the days of a giant (military construction) program are over unless we have some kind of special program that drives us there.”

Unlike the Army and Air Force, many customers can choose who to hire to do work for them and opt for the

Alaska District.

“They come to us because they know what they are getting, because of you and what you’ve done in the past,” Lestochi said. “Good work begets more work.”

The district’s evolving mission and declining budget involves much risk and uncertainty but also presents new opportunities.

He anticipates Alaska will benefit from the new national defense focus in the Asian-Pacific region and will do well in the competition for funding for civil works. Other federal agencies are shrinking and losing some of their engineering or construction capability, which opens another source of income if they turn to the Corps.

Another factor in the district’s current financial crunch is that during the buildup in the 2000s, work force numbers and costs of those employees increased. For various reasons, permanent employees were hired instead of temporary employees or contractors. The defunct National Security Personnel System also raised labor costs.

Labor is the biggest expense, and income is now less predictable without a large military construction program. Under Operation Crossroads, the district is looking to reshape the work force in a time of changing workload, and it has taken many steps so far to lower costs.

The district has restricted hiring and modified the administrative re-employment rights policy to limit the challenges it brings. In the last year, 72 people left while 10 either returned under administrative re-employment rights or were new hires, Lestochi said.

The voluntary early retirement and voluntary separation incentive pay program will continue to encourage attrition, with 30 authorizations requested for this fiscal year.

Employees also are getting chances to learn about other positions in the district where they can transfer their skills from dwindling to growing programs, such as in the environmental and special projects branch. District members can capitalize on these opportunities by being willing to move to where the work is available. They have to be flexible, adaptable and demonstrate a pioneering spirit in these times of change, Lestochi said.

Another giant job reservoir is in Japan and Korea. A few employees have taken or are on their way to accepting a permanent assignment. Temporary duty in these countries is another possibility. Employees who take a job overseas receive statutory re-employment rights to Alaska.

Employees are reminded to visit the Operation Crossroads site on the intranet to view the latest information and documents on the district’s future.



Photo courtesy of Indian Air Force

Breaking ground

(From right) Steve Dahl, Northern Area Office quality assurance representative, and Kathy Farrell, foreign military sales office integrator, observe the laying of foundation stone during a groundbreaking ceremony for the C-17 aircraft beddown program at Hindan Air Force Station near New Delhi, India, Oct. 19. The \$150 million effort in support of the foreign military sales program consists of many components supporting the operation and maintenance of the aircraft, such as a corrosion control hangar, taxiway improvements and power distribution from a substation.

Project manager fulfilled by humanitarian assistance

By John Budnik
Public Affairs Office

It's not every day in a professional career that personal fulfillment serves you a beverage.

This was the case for Pat Fitzgerald, project manager in the environmental and special projects branch, when he met a recent graduate of a school built in northern Laos by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-Alaska District while taking a break from a warranty inspection Oct. 24.

The student was waiting tables at a restaurant to earn money to attend a university in January in Vientiane, the capital of Laos.

This young man is one of many who have benefited from the district's humanitarian assistance program in Asia.

Fitzgerald has worked in the program for almost two years after transitioning from program management's civil works branch, where he was a planner. He was looking for something different and described ESP as a "product-oriented" branch.

The fast-paced nature of managing a project is an attractive quality. Design takes three to four months, and construction sometimes lasts less than a year, Fitzgerald said.

Projects mainly consist of schools, medical facilities, flood management centers, cyclone shelters and foot bridges. He currently oversees projects in Laos and Nepal, but the program builds in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, too.



Courtesy photo

Pat Fitzgerald, project manager, poses with a graduate from a school in Laos the Alaska District built under the humanitarian assistance program.

The projects are coordinated between the State Department, U.S. Pacific Command and the host nation. The Alaska District's role is to serve as the construction agent by receiving the funds and executing the need, Fitzgerald said.

"There is a long history of the Department of Defense working together with the State Department, and we are pleased to be part of the team," said Clare Jaeger, ESP branch chief. "We do these projects because there is a need, but also to support DoD missions in these countries and help build partnerships."

The humanitarian assistance program has a \$29 million budget with 74 projects for FY2013. When a project is

completed, the customer, along with U.S. Embassy and U.S. Pacific Command officials, celebrates the opening with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

When building schools, Fitzgerald said the U.S. Embassy's goal is to provide facilities that are a safe and attractive place for students to spend their time beyond class. Fitzgerald believes the Corps' efforts can achieve this goal in a region that still shows marks of destruction suffered during the Vietnam War.

When construction disputes arise, Fitzgerald enjoys the challenge of handling the different cultural perspectives encountered from Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese or Cambodian contractors who may be working on the same project. Successfully applying people skills needed to find the "common terms of agreement" can be satisfying, he said.

Fitzgerald traveled overseas eight times in 2012 for a total of 16 weeks and will return from his latest assignment in January 2013.

Traveling to other parts of the world gives him an appreciation for the comforts of home, but he admires the simple lifestyle observed in the countries he visits.

For example, Fitzgerald noted that local children can entertain themselves with the most basic items.

When Fitzgerald returns to the host nation to inspect projects, he always visits the classrooms.

"All these little faces look up at you," he said. "It's a rewarding aspect of the job."



Photo by Doug Hart

Clear contributions

The Northern Area Office celebrated the end of the fiscal year with a pizza party and awards presentation at Fort Wainwright Nov. 1. Col. Christopher Lestochi, district commander, recognizes (from left) Roy Henry, negotiator; Scott Newman, quality assurance representative and Alvinia Quarles, civil engineer technician, with commander's coins for their contributions to the power plant facility project at Clear Air Force Station.

Across the district

CFC fundraising drive ends

Thanks to the generosity of the work force, the district's annual Combined Federal Campaign raised \$38,194 for various charities.

Thrift Savings Plan limits rise for 2013

For 2013, the maximum contribution amount for the Thrift Savings Plan increases to \$17,500 while catch-up contributions remain at \$5,500. To change or start contributions to the traditional or Roth TSP, visit the Army Benefits Center-Civilian site at <https://www.abc.army.mil/> and process the transaction in the Employee Benefits Information System. For help choosing between the traditional and Roth retirement accounts, visit the TSP Web site at <https://www.tsp.gov/whatsnew/roth/compareRoth.shtml>. Contact Steve Janik in the Alaska Civilian Personnel Advisory Center at 753-2832 with questions or requests for assistance.

Annual leave donations

Employees expecting to lose unused annual leave may donate the hours directly to a colleague with a personal or medical emergency who has exhausted his or her available paid leave. Donating before the end of the year is preferred because of restrictions on the amount of hours that can be donated toward the end of the leave year. To donate, complete an Optional Form 630-a and provide to Clay Williamson. A fillable form is available at http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/opm630a.pdf.

Port study

Doug Playter of CH2M Hill presents the preliminary results of the suitability study that analyzed the foundation system for the Port of Anchorage Intermodal Expansion Project during a meeting with assembly members on Nov. 9 at city hall. In partnership with the Municipality of Anchorage and Maritime Administration, the Alaska District contracted the engineering consultant to conduct an independent technical review of the project. The \$2.2 million study identified deficiencies in both the design and construction of the Open Cell Sheet Pile system. The final report is scheduled for release in early February. In the meantime, a companion study is under way to develop several alternative design concepts for completing the north end of the expansion project. These recommendations are due by March.

Contract awarded

The district awarded a contract for \$21,813,389 to Bristol General Contractors LLC under a competitive 8(a) solicitation Nov. 28 to construct a 36,720 square foot addition to the Buckner Field House at JBER-Richardson. The addition consists of an indoor swimming pool adjacent to the existing facility, baseball field, two softball fields and multipurpose athletic field.

Inclement weather guidelines

To mitigate safety and health hazards associated with wind, snow, ice, extremely cold temperatures and other adverse conditions, Alaska District employees will follow the latest guidance of the base commander at their assigned duty station. Personnel in the Anchorage area may obtain official reporting status updates by visiting the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Facebook or Twitter pages, as well as viewing the Web site at www.jber.af.mil. Another option is calling the following numbers for these locations: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson 552-INFO (4636), Fort Wainwright 353-7109, Eielson Air Force Base 377-6127 and Fort Greely 869-3480. Sources providing reliable reports about the status of weather, roads and military installations include: Alaska Department of Transportation by calling 511 or visiting www.511.alaska.gov, National Weather Service information line at 1-800-472-0391 and the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson operator at 552-1110. Furthermore, several radio and television stations provide regular updates in the Anchorage area during the morning. Updates are available at Alaska's Total Traffic Network by dialing #847.

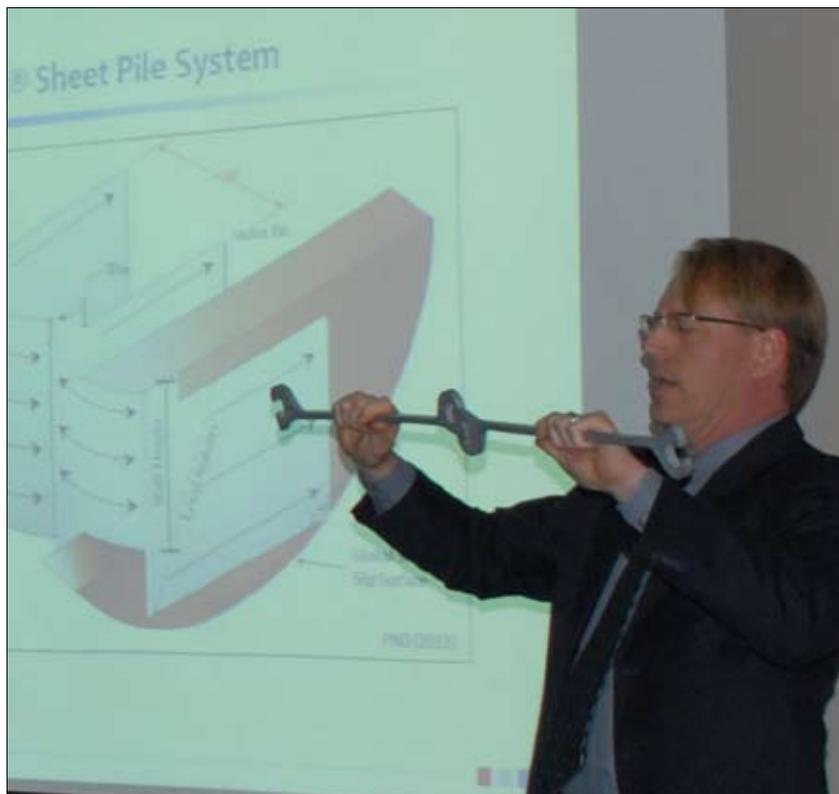


Photo by John Budnik

Upcoming events

- Dec. 20** Holiday Door Decoration Judging
Jan. 21 Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday
Jan. 22 ISO Recertification Audit Begins



Doug Wootten, safety specialist with the Safety and Occupational Health Office, deployed to the Afghanistan Engineer District-South Nov. 25 and is scheduled to return Nov. 24, 2013.

Deployments

Afghanistan—Linda Arrington, Tom Baker, Juliet Brown, Sgt. 1st Class Robert Contreres, Michael Doty, Ronald Faulkner, Roger Green, Ron Jackson, Brad Leavitt, Ali Martinez, Darrell Neal, David Purdy, Reynaldo Singson, Jessica Skinner, Sharon Thomas, Capt. Corey Warren, Frederick Wiedmaier, Doug Wootten



Courtesy photo

Water dog

Bobber the Water Safety Dog reported for duty at the Chena River Lakes Flood Control Project in November. From his new residence, he plans to stay busy with water safety training in the local elementary schools and sharing his message at parades, the Tanana Fair and other area events.



Photo by Curt Biberdorf

Cold facts

R.C. Harrop, director of the Warrior Quest Adventure Program at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, displays a winter boot while explaining how to dress in layers during a class on cold weather safety at district headquarters Nov. 30. An experienced outdoorsman and guide, Harrop discussed prevention, symptoms and treatment of frostbite and hypothermia as well as tips for safe winter driving. Several slide presentations about cold weather safety are available on the district Web site at <http://www.poa.usace.army.mil/About/Offices/Safety.aspx>.

Basket bounty

(From back to front) Sally Cameron, Jeannette Levine and Julie Ebben of the Alaska District Engineers Federal Credit Union browse the selections during the annual gift basket silent auction fundraiser sponsored by the Social Activities Committee Nov. 14 at district headquarters. The donated basket themes varied from international treats to survival gear. The fundraiser collected more than \$900 for the winter party. The highest bid baskets were In an Emergency, Snow Day, Home Movie Night and International Delight. The most talked about basket was Warm Winter Nights, and the most humorous was Jersey Shore Survival Kit.



Photo by John Budnik