



## **CH2M HILL making a difference in hurricane ravaged Mississippi**

Although only three Mississippi counties border the Gulf of Mexico, the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina extends much further than the piles of rubble that have replaced the once beach-lined communities.

"The scale of the storm was so enormous that its footprint is still felt hundreds of miles from where it hit," said Patt O'Flaherty who has been on temporary assignment from her home office in Seattle for the past several months working on the FEMA project. "Much of northern Mississippi is heavily forested and the strong sustained winds and subsequent tornadoes caused the trees to topple over, or to corkscrew and break at 15 to 20 feet. Many of the homes fell victim to the trees that toppled."

CH2M HILL has been working under contract with FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to provide temporary housing to Mississippians since October. FEMA divided the state into three branches and gave CH2M HILL responsibility for Branches 2 and 3, and in early March FEMA also gave the firm responsibility for Branch 1 (the six southernmost counties).

As of April 15, CH2M HILL has installed nearly 5500 temporary homes in Mississippi. The state has placed a strong emphasis on private sites, so whenever possible CH2M HILL tries to get families into temporary housing on their own property. However, in cases where residents do not own their property CH2M HILL works to place the applicants in group or commercial site. Group sites are temporary trailer or mobile home parks designed and built as a result of the hurricanes. Commercial sites are existing commercial trailer parks or campgrounds where FEMA and CH2M HILL negotiate leases to house evacuees in existing property.

### **Local hires key to team**

CH2M HILL's Mississippi team is comprised of a diverse range of staff, very few of whom are full-time CH2M HILL employees. Many of the firm's employees who worked on nuclear projects at Rocky Flats and Hanford found their assignments ending as the hurricane project was gearing up, and have been hired on as flex employees for the FEMA project. In addition, there are employees recruited from national staffing agencies such as HKA and TLC as well as local subcontractors from Spectrum Employment Agency and SOL Engineering.

““We are bringing all these different people together to make a working team and it's worked well,” said Ed Cannon, CH2M HILL's Mississippi project manager.

Many of the local subcontractors also had to evacuate and are currently repairing their homes, but they are proud to be able to help their fellow Mississippians find housing.

### **Lessons Learned**

Initial challenges have been overcome and the team has settled into a routine with newly created policies and procedures.

"CH2M HILL did not have a great deal of experience in FEMA disaster response prior to Katrina, so there were a lot of things that we learned on the fly, like how to track our work and format our reports to be compatible with FEMA's," said Cannon. "When we started work in September, we were actually shuffling paper forms and folders around between plastic bins. When we needed to know how many trailers had been installed that day, for example, we went to the appropriate bin and did a manual count. We slowly developed a database to do the same thing, but not without a lot of trial and error. Now we have a working but somewhat unwieldy database."

The team also learned flexibility and adaptability in responding quickly to constantly changing orders coming from FEMA and local officials. “You had to be quick on your feet to keep up with the constant changes,” said Cannon.

When CH2M HILL moved into Branch 1 they opened local offices where representatives from all subcontractors are housed. Teams have formed by pairing subcontractors from all aspects of the process. Haulers are paired with an inspection team so everyone is working toward the common goal of getting units ready-for-occupancy. This has also opened up communication, resulting in increased efficiency and allowing everyone to learn from identified best practices.

"If I had to select a model it would be this, partnering with everyone in one location where everyone is talking about issues and sharing ideas" said Trey Chauncey with Setco, a subcontractor working for CH2M HILL.

### **Emotional Rollercoaster**

Seeing so much devastation and working daily with people who have lost everything has proven to be an emotional rollercoaster for many of the employees involved with the relief efforts.

At Christmas time employees in Mississippi collected more than \$4,000, which was used to purchase gifts and Christmas hams for several families who had lost everything during Hurricane Katrina and been leased into trailers by CH2M HILL. In addition, a contracting officer with the firm had a mother who is a schoolteacher in Virginia, her students wanted to help. Through the Hugs for Hope program the students collected stuffed animals which were sent to displaced children in Mississippi with a note of hope.

CH2M HILL staff distributed the animals and took photos to send back to the Virginian students.

### **Recovering and Rebuilding**

Mississippi is beginning to rebuild. Businesses that had been closed or operating out of tents in their parking lots are beginning to open their doors. Driving around you see people outside repairing their homes and businesses, cranes make up the skyline of Biloxi and the rumbling of construction equipment has replaced the eerie silence. Destroyed homes are being demolished to make room for FEMA trailers or to clear the way for residents to rebuild their homes. If a trailer has already been installed on the property it is CH2M HILL's responsibility to temporarily move the trailer to clear the path for the bulldozers and then to replace and re-install the trailer.

"It is a dance to orchestrate the moving of trailers" said Cannon of the process.

The rebuilding effort is also visible through the higher number of deactivations that are occurring as people move out of trailers and back into their homes. CH2M HILL has deactivated nearly 2400 trailers in Mississippi and is currently deactivating 80-90 daily, a rate that Cannon expects to continue for the foreseeable future.