

National Guard: Response in Polk, Barron, and Langlade Counties continues with debris removal

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by Capt. Joe Trovato

COMSTOCK, Wis. — More than 100 Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin Army and Air National Guard remain on duty in Polk, Barron, and Langlade Counties assisting civil authorities in the aftermath of intense storms that cut a swath of destruction across northern Wisconsin July 20-21.

Soldiers from the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, 724th Engineer Battalion and the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 115th Fighter Wing and 128th Air Refueling Wing are all part of the ongoing response in which National Guard Servicemembers are assessing the storm's damage and assisting with debris cleanup along roadways.

Three separate task forces – one for each county – are operating with approximately 30 Soldiers or Airmen each. The task forces consist of assessment teams, chainsaw teams, and debris clearance teams with assets to haul debris or chip it in place.

Critical in the short term is their objective of clearing heavy debris from the public right-of-way so emergency vehicles and residents can safely navigate the roads.

According to 2nd Lt. Isaac Geffers, the executive officer of the Wausau-based Headquarters Company for the 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion and the officer in charge of the Barron County Task Force, his team of nearly 30 Soldiers and Airmen are clearing an average of approximately 60 10-ton dump loads of debris per day, in addition to running a wood chipper nearly nonstop.

The National Guard has a dual-mission unique from every other branch of the military. In addition to fulfilling its role as the primary combat reserve of the Army and Air Force, the National Guard also serves as the first military responder at home during times of emergency. Serving in local communities was a major factor in Geffers choosing the National Guard.

“I really like helping out the community,” he said. “That’s part of the reason I joined the Guard, so it’s good to give back to the community here in Polk and Barron Counties, so it’s been a great experience so far. It’s also been a great challenge for me. There’s a lot of different units and a lot of different assets that we’re trying to manage.”

The same was true for other members of the task force.

“It feels pretty good,” Pfc. Austin Vandezande, a Soldier assigned to Company F, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion in Mosinee said. “This is why I enlisted in the National Guard instead of any other branch, so I could help out in situations like this in the area that I’m from.”

Sgt. Cody Grosskreutz, from the 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, saw the mission as part of his duty in the Wisconsin National Guard.

“These are people that I don’t necessarily personally know, but they’re our neighbors,” he said. “It’s people that I know. It’s part of our job as National Guard to also take care of the homefront, the home defense, taking care of natural disasters like this. It’s part of our duty, so it’s nice to actually be able to accomplish the things that we enlisted to do as well as any other military obligations that we have.”

The National Guard’s role and mission in response to the late July storms has evolved. In the initial days after the storm, Gov. Tony Evers declared a state of emergency, authorizing Maj. Gen. Don Dunbar to call members of the National Guard to state active duty to assist as needed. A team of approximately 30 National Guard troops mobilized to state active duty to assist civil authorities in Langlade County distribute water to residents without power in order to flush septic systems, run showers, wash dishes, or consume as drinking water.

That mission concluded July 24, before damage assessment teams began assessing the debris in Polk, Barron, and Langlade counties. As a clearer picture of the scope of work emerged, more National Guard troops mobilized to state active duty to begin clearing debris. Within hours of notification, the task force came together and moved to the affected area.

“I think that really speaks to the adaptability of the National Guard and whatever mission comes down we’re ready to respond to it, getting things moving,” Geffers

said. "Soldiers from all over the state volunteered and answered the call and came up here, so it's a great thing to show that we're always ready."

One of those Guardsmen was Tech. Sgt. Gregory Witt, an aerospace propulsion specialist assigned to the 115th Fighter Wing in Madison who volunteered to join a chainsaw team. He was in an airport in Arizona when he got the call.

"I think it goes back to the beginning and the minutemen and how quickly they could mobilize for natural disaster or worldwide events," Witt said. "It truly is a tremendous thing."

Spc. Haley Wellner, also a Company F Soldier, was at work when she got the call to respond.

"It's not just a claim that we make that we're always ready to go," she said. "I was at work Friday night. I got the text at my eight o'clock break, left work, drove up, and was here by about two in the morning and ready to go."

Wellner said the Guard has made a major impact on the area since she arrived.

"Compared to when we started to now, you can just see it was just trees and devastation and damage everywhere," she said. "Even when we drove through the town of Barron, there were still trees on buildings and stuff like that. In one of the piles we went through there were power lines down and now you can actually see the ground again in the ditches, and all the people that live here are always coming over and thanking us, so it makes a really big difference."

Witt agreed, noting that the communities they are supporting have been incredibly supportive and appreciative of the Guard's contribution to the recovery effort.

"I think we're having a tremendous impact for the community" Witt said. "We just had the chairman of the township stop by and thank us for what we were doing. Yesterday we had a wonderful neighbor stop by and bring us bottled water. And everyone is coming by and saying, 'thank you,' and how much they appreciate everything that the Army and Air Force are doing out here."

Sgt. Edward Vanvalen, also assigned to Company F, said he was grateful for the opportunity to help.

"We're making a difference for these civilians out here that really need us right now," he said. "Some of them couldn't even get into their driveways over the weekend when we started here."

"We're always prepping, standing ready, [conducting maintenance checks on] our trucks, our equipment, keeping everything on the ready, on standby," he added. "We might be on standby for years, weeks, days, but when it happens, it shows it's all done with a purpose, so when we're called, four hours, eight hours, or less, we're there. We're ready to go. We load up, and we move it out, fueled up, trucks at 100 percent, and we get there and say, 'where can we help.'"

National Guard leaders said Wisconsin National Guard troops plan to stay on site in Polk, Barron, and Langlade Counties as long as their assistance is needed. The Guard stands ready to take on additional missions, if requested.