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From Chehalis to Chauvin, WCC crews lend helping hand

by Curt Hart, communications manager, Shorelands and Environmental Assistance

For the 135 young women and men who make up Ecology's Washington Conservation Corps (WCC), the watchword for this year of service has been water — and mud, mold and debris.

Our WCC crews spent much of their 2007-08 service year doing emergency response. It began when Ecology deployed 100 crew members to help communities affected by the record-setting deluge in December 2007.

The storm and flooding caused nearly \$100 million in damage and left hundreds of people homeless, especially in the Chehalis River basin.

Cleaning up in Lewis County

In Lewis County, they helped Ecology spill responders locate, retrieve and transport more than 2,800 containers deposited by floodwaters. WCC members also helped:

- Collect more than 850 tires.
- Dispose more than 3,500 gallons of oil, gasoline, paint, corrosive liquids and pesticides.
- Discard about 17,000 pounds of oil-contaminated debris and empty oil and hazardous material containers.

"What these young women and men have accomplished for the people and environment in Washington is immeasurable," said Gov. Chris Gregoire. "Their selflessness, extraordinarily hard work and commitment are absolutely inspiring. They are to be commended for their fine public service."

WCC crews respond to Midwest floods

Ecology participated in mutual-aid efforts with other states' through the National Disaster Response Plan. And this year, some WCC crews worked as far away as Iowa and Louisiana.

When record-setting rains collapsed an Iowa River levee, two WCC crews left for Oakville, Iowa, with less than 24 hours notice. Flood waters had transformed an area miles wide into a river of devastation. In less than a month, crews cleaned out 25 homes that had been submerged in up to 15 feet of water

Deployed to the Gulf Coast

On Sept. 25, 54 WCC crew members and supervisors returned home after nearly a month working on hurricane relief efforts in Louisiana. Crews worked long days assessing damage, tarping roofs, delivering supplies, mucking out damaged homes, and assisting in shelters. Much of their efforts centered in Chauvin, Louisiana, a

small town hit hard by flooding and wind damage.

Chauvin resident Lisa Hernandez was so moved by their work she penned a letter to WCC crew coordinator Roland McGill, Shorelands and Environmental Assistance (SEA).

Angels with hard hats

"Hurricane Ike flooded our home with four feet of water. When I tell you that it is overwhelming, it truly is," Hernandez said. "Only my husband and I live in our home as our children are grown and gone...we have had NO assistance from anyone, we have had none — until your 'angels' saved us."

Hernandez said she and her husband had no income for three weeks but heard WCC crews were gutting homes for free. She found crew coordinator Bob Milner and asked, "Where do I go for help with a home that has mold and mildew crawling up the walls fast?"

A short time later, a WCC crew arrived at Hernandez's home.

"Before I knew it, trucks pulled up and workers unloaded one after the other continuously until it seemed there was no end. ... I cry very seldom in my life but this one took my heart. Within five minutes, men and women were hauling floor moldings out of my home," she said. "They began to 'gut' our home out and did so with perfect attitudes and respect to me and each other. I never heard a cuss word, I never saw a bad attitude, and they saw me crying and consoled me as well. These guys are my heroes!"

Director lauds WCC crews

Ecology Director Jay Manning lauded the WCC's "selfless work to help those in need in Washington and across the nation."

"I want to personally thank everyone for all their excellent work and sacrifice," Jay said. "And when I read the letter from Lisa Hernandez, it brought a tear to my eye. We are so proud and fortunate to have these fantastic people on Ecology's team."

Rob Spath, SEA, who oversees Ecology's WCC program, said there is still work to be done in the Gulf Coast, but the new work season is starting. Supervisors need to hire WCC members. If help is still needed, new crews could be deployed in November.



WCC crew members Lucy Coffman (left) and Annie Honrath serve meals for evacuated Shreveport, La., residents at an American Red Cross shelter. Crews also helped set up the shelter.



WCC crew coordinator Bob Milner helping remove storm-blown trees from a home in Louisiana.

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