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Guardsmen lend hand to La Jolla tribe

Washed-out roads are getting rebuilt

By **Onell R. Soto**

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NORTH COUNTY – After the Poomacha fire burned through the La Jolla Indian reservation last October, the rains came and washed out dirt roads.

It was a mess, as soil no longer held in place by scrubs and trees flowed down mountainsides.

One road, leading to a water tower that supplies more than half the reservation's residents, was impassable. Workers had to hike over boulders to get there, and dirt covering a high-pressure water pipe washed away, raising the risk the line might rupture.

Another road, used to get to a wastewater treatment facility, could be fixed, but only until the next storm. It was prone to damage in heavy rain.

That has changed after a few weeks of work from soldiers and airmen in the National Guard, who rebuilt the roads to be safer and last longer. They also learned skills they will apply in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Military engineering units typically train on military bases, but that work isn't permanent.

“It's good to do a project . . . that you don't have to tear down at the end of the week,” said Sgt. Jeff DeGraff, who is with a California Army National Guard unit from Fresno.

DeGraff helped bury a 4-foot culvert under a road leading from the tribe's riverside campground to an evaporation pond.

With no casino, the campground is the tribe's primary source of income.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

A caravan of vehicles drove up Los Vallecitos Road on the La Jolla Indian Reservation last week during a tour of repairs made by the National Guard.

The Poomacha fire burned 59 of the 180 homes on the reservation and 92 percent of the land. A landslide claimed another home.

Since then, the tribe, one of San Diego County's poorest, has used help from the federal government, other tribes and charities to rebuild a majority of the houses and reopen roads.

DeGraff is one of nearly 30 National Guard members from California, Indiana, Michigan and Nevada taking part in the monthlong construction project, which included work on 1½ miles of dirt roads.

The effort is part of the Innovative Readiness Training Program, which seeks to connect needy communities with reserve units looking for real-world experience, said Col. Tim Swann of the California Army National Guard.

“At the end of the day, we get some great, trained soldiers,” Swann said. “And it has a lasting impact on these people’s lives.”

Soldiers in the program also dig wells, build dams and care for sick people.

The tribe worked with Walking Shield, an Orange County nonprofit, to put in the request for the \$750,000 federally funded project.

The military provides the workers and the equipment, but not the materials.

That’s where the San Diego Foundation stepped in, getting wood for forms, pipes, culverts and cement for the construction project.

“It’s just a great partnership,” said John Castillo, Walking Shield’s executive director.

The group has previously worked with the San Pasqual Indian band and has projects planned with the Mesa Grande and Santa Ysabel tribes.

LaVonne Peck, a La Jolla tribal member who helped coordinate recovery efforts, was amazed at the work.

“I never thought I’d get excited about culverts,” Peck said as she walked with her mother, Viola, near a headwall, a large concrete structure designed to channel stormwater under a road.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs typically spends \$20,000 a year for road maintenance on the La Jolla reservation, and that is why the outside help has been so important, tribal leaders said.


One of the roads the military engineers rebuilt leads to one of the most populated reservation neighborhoods, where rains stranded residents last winter.

“It’s amazing; now we have two ways to get out of there,” said resident Viola Peck, who served on the tribal council for 42 years.

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