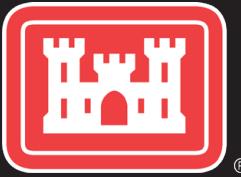


# Los Angeles District NewsCastle



Special Edition

A quarterly publication of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District

2026



**One year later**

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**Supporting recovery after the  
2025 Southern California wildfires**

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**Special Edition**

Official publication  
of the  
U.S. Army Corps  
of Engineers  
Los Angeles District

Special Edition 2026

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“There aren’t many opportunities to directly see the large-scale impact of your efforts, especially when giving back to a community. But this work is different. You can feel it. It’s real and it’s rewarding.”

**Sarah Coles**  
Contracting Officer's Representative  
California Wildfire Debris Mission  
Los Angeles District  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. ARMY US Army Corps of Engineers

“I’m motivated to contribute to a cause larger than myself. This mission is special because it highlights the selflessness, teamwork, and professionalism of USACE, coming together for a community at a moment’s notice.”

**CPT Anthony Adams**  
Public Affairs Liaison Officer (Engineer)  
California Wildfire Debris Mission  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. ARMY US Army Corps of Engineers

“After 38 years of working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, this is the worst disaster I’ve experienced. And this one is personal, I have a brother who got evacuated. So I’m proud to be here, making a real difference.”

**Robert Ramos**  
Project Engineer, Quality Assurance  
California Wildfire Debris Mission  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. ARMY US Army Corps of Engineers

# Voices from the Field

“The mission was not just about clearing debris. It was about understanding the people, the survivors and their needs.”



**Col. Brian Sawser**  
Emergency Field Office Pacific Palisades commander

“Clearing debris is the first step toward recovery, and we are committed to helping residents in communities across LA County rebuild.”



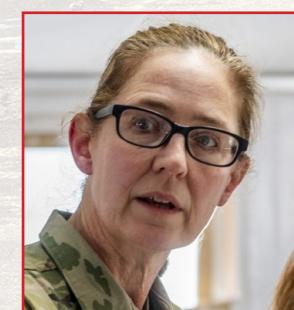
**Col. Eric Swenson**  
USACE Recovery Field Office commander

“This mission is a testament to the power of collaboration and the extraordinary depth of expertise supporting USACE in delivering results for those impacted by the wildfires.”



**Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly**  
USACE deputy commanding general for Civil Works and Emergency Operations

“I think LA is a very resilient and a very special city for our country. I got a lot out of it just talking to city leadership — to county leadership — and knowing we’re here with them for the long haul.”



**Maj. Gen. Kim Colloton**  
USACE deputy chief of engineers (now retired)



**Lt. Gen. William "Butch" Graham, 56th chief of engineers and commanding general of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, views wildfire damage Jan. 24, 2025, in Pacific Palisades, California. USACE Los Angeles District received a mission from FEMA Jan. 17, 2025, to assist with debris removal in support of the State of California following the devastating wildfires in Los Angeles County.**

On Jan. 7, 2025, Los Angeles County awoke to a nightmare. Two massive wildfires — the Eaton Fire in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades Fire along the coast — exploded across the landscape, whipped into firestorms by relentless Santa Ana winds.

By the time the flames were contained, about 40,000 acres had burned. More than 16,000 structures lay in ruins. Entire neighborhoods vanished in a single night. Thirty-one people lost their lives. Nearly 200,000 residents fled their homes under evacuation orders.

For the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District, headquartered in downtown LA, the disaster was more than statistics. Among the ashes were the homes of three district employees and one retiree. This mission was personal.

As firefighters fought the largest blazes, more fires ignited across the county — the Lidia, Archer, Woodley, Sunset, Kenneth, Hurst and Auto fires — all fueled by drought-parched hillsides. On Jan. 22, the Hughes Fire in Castaic erupted, compounding the devastation. Smoke shrouded the region. Families crowded shelters. Streets were

blocked by convoys of first responders. California was in crisis.

On Jan. 8, the president approved a federal emergency declaration, releasing money and resources to aid the state. For USACE, the call to action came swiftly. Col. Andrew Baker, LA District commander, declared an internal emergency to focus his team's efforts.

"This mission affected us not just as professionals, but as neighbors, friends and community members," Baker later said.

The scale of the challenge was daunting. Yet from the moment the fires were extinguished, the seeds of recovery began to take root.



**“This mission affected us not just as professionals, but as neighbors, friends and community members.”**

**Col. Andrew Baker**  
USACE Los Angeles District commander

Photo by Dan Collins



## The Call to Action

Maj. Gen. Kim Colloton, deputy chief of engineers and deputy commanding general with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, meets with LA County Public Works Director Mark Pestrella Jan. 15, 2025, in Pasadena, California. Also pictured is Steph Bishop, information officer with the Command General Staff of the California Interagency Incident Management Team 4. USACE received three mission assignments from FEMA in support of the State of California in response to the LA County wildfires.

When FEMA needs large-scale debris removal, it turns to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Under the Stafford Act, USACE is the lead federal agency for clearing disaster debris from private property. This is an essential first step toward recovery.

On Jan. 17, FEMA issued the mission assignment: oversee private property debris removal in Altadena and Pacific Palisades, the hardest-hit areas. Within days, USACE established a cross-enterprise team pulling in engineers, logisticians, safety officers and public affairs specialists from across USACE's enterprise.

Recovery Field Offices were set up in both Altadena and the Palisades. Joint field offices linked USACE personnel directly with FEMA, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, Los Angeles County Public Works and local jurisdictions. Dozens of USACE employees left their home districts — from Philadelphia to St. Louis to Rock Island — to volunteer for deployment in California.

"This mission is personal for us," said Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly, USACE deputy commanding general for Civil Works and Emergency

Operations. "Our teams on the ground are bringing the same urgency, precision and care to residential properties that we do with all our civil works and military construction missions around the world."

Behind the sweeping mission were thousands of smaller acts: engineers analyzing maps, contractors maneuvering excavators, safety specialists monitoring dust and outreach officers sitting with survivors to explain next steps.

From the start, USACE leadership at every level emphasized urgency, precision and partnership.

Maj. Gen. Kim Colloton, deputy chief of engineers and deputy commanding general (now retired), visited the Los Angeles District Jan. 15, 2025, to meet with first responders stationed at the Rose Bowl and to assess the scope of the disaster, alongside Los Angeles County Public Works Director Mark Pestrella.

"It was good to see people from the district and to be able to meet up with LA County," Colloton said. "I think it's really important understanding that they have a huge responsibility in responding and recovery efforts."

After touring fire-affected areas in Altadena, Colloton reflected on the city's strength in the face of devastation.

"I think LA is a very resilient and a very special city for our country," she said. "I got a lot out of it just talking to city leadership — to county leadership — and knowing we're here with them for the long haul."

Recovery started in two stages. Phase 1, led by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, removed household hazardous waste, which included paints, solvents, oils, batteries and pesticides. Clearing toxic materials was critical to protect workers and prepare properties for the next step.

Phase 2 fell to USACE: removing ash, burned structures, hazardous trees and vehicles. Crews had to work cautiously; each site was unique, and many properties were unstable and unsafe.

On Feb. 11, the first Phase 2 operations began. At Loma Alta and Edison schools in Pasadena, teams removed fire debris so children could one day return to safe classrooms. The work marked the first visible progress after weeks of devastation.

"Beginning Phase 2 means we're making tangible progress toward recovery," said Col. Eric Swenson, commander of the Recovery Field Office. "Our teams are working with



Col. Brian Sawser, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Emergency Field Office – Pacific Palisades commander, assesses fire-damaged properties Feb. 26, 2025, in Pacific Palisades, California.

urgency and care to remove hazardous debris, while ensuring the safety of the community, workers and the environment."

From schools to residential neighborhoods, each cleared site marked progress for affected Los Angeles County communities.

The mission was one of collaboration. USACE led the debris removal effort in support of FEMA, while state and local partners

coordinated with USACE on safe haul routes, community outreach and rights-of-entry. As the mission gained momentum, USACE began drawing on its extensive network of partners to optimize operations. Task Force Phoenix, established to manage the mission, brought together experts from academia, industry and the military to streamline logistics and accelerate debris removal.

USACE's Advanced Contracting Initiative to help the agency scale quickly to meet demand.

By mid-February, the operation's impact became tangible for survivors like Joe Correia, a retired firefighter whose Pacific Palisades home was among the first cleared under the Private Property Debris Removal Program.

"I was one of the first ones to turn in my right-of-entry paperwork," Correia said, watching as crews loaded the last of the debris from his lot. "The people at the disaster center, everyone, have been really, really helpful."

Correia, who plans to rebuild his home "the exact same size, in the exact same spot," said the debris removal marked an important step toward rebuilding.



# Partnerships in Motion

**Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deputy commanding general for civil works and emergency operations, center, joins community members and leaders Feb. 7, 2025, to mark the first site to undergo private property debris removal in Altadena, California. At left is Col. Eric Swenson, Recovery Field Office commander for the Debris Removal Mission.**

From the earliest days of the response, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers worked in partnership with local neighborhoods, city and county agencies, the State of California, and federal partners across Los Angeles County.

When FEMA issued a mission assignment Jan. 17, USACE quickly mobilized, establishing coordination channels through both the Joint Field Office and the Recovery Field Office. These hubs aligned FEMA, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, Los Angeles County Public Works and local governments.

"Our success hinges on seamless collaboration," said Action Officer Angela Radke, who helped stand up the Joint Field Office. "The JFO and RFO are partners, not just colleagues. We take FEMA's mission assignments, break them down and ensure the RFO has everything they need to hit the ground running. It's about efficiency,

minimizing delays and maximizing our impact on the recovery effort."

## Unity Across All Levels

That structure supported coordination among federal, state and local agencies as debris removal operations moved forward in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades.

FEMA Region 9 Administrator Bob Fenton said the work is central to long-term recovery.

"Debris removal is a critical step toward rebuilding these communities," he said. "FEMA remains committed to supporting local communities in their recovery every step of the way."

At the county level, Los Angeles County Public Works coordinated debris haul routes, community outreach and environmental compliance alongside USACE.

"This is a welcome milestone," said Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair Kathryn Barger. "It shows that we are working

together on an accelerated timetable to restore our facilities and communities as swiftly and safely as possible."

That collaboration extended into city partnerships as well. Pasadena Unified School District Superintendent Elizabeth Blanco praised the teamwork that enabled debris removal at two school campuses to begin just weeks after the fires.

"The safety of our students and staff is our top priority," she said. "This debris removal effort will allow us to begin the recovery process with confidence, and we are grateful for the support from USACE, FEMA and our local partners."

## Integrating Federal, State, Local Expertise

USACE's partnerships also reached beyond emergency management into academic, industrial and military spheres. Task Force Phoenix convened experts from UCLA, Cal OES and the private sector to refine logistics and environmental safeguards.



**A fog-covered view of wildfire destruction along California's Pacific Coast Highway shows the remains of structures and debris left behind in the aftermath of the 2025 Southern California wildfires.**

At UCLA, researchers employed a Los Angeles "digital twin" to take logistics to the next level.

"Leveraging a digital twin, our researchers are optimizing key factors, such as truck routing and scheduling of large movements, to ensure that debris removal is efficient and safe," said Jiaqi Ma, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering.

Meanwhile, U.S. Transportation Command brought national-level logistics expertise to bear.

"Our team provided access to software that optimizes logistics networks and analyzes impacts on supply chains for operations planning," said Curt Zargan, deputy director of SDDC's Transportation Engineering Agency.

## Contracting Support

The debris removal effort relied on a network of contracts to support operations across affected communities. USACE's Advanced Contracting Initiative, administered through the USACE Rock Island District, enabled rapid mobilization within days of FEMA's mission assignment.

"The collaboration between USACE and contractors under the ACI program is critical to ensuring debris removal operations are effective and appropriately scalable," said Col. Richard Pfeiffer, deputy director of contracting at



**“It's not just about shifting supplies. It's about those moments — helping a family find their footing again. That's the heart of what we do.”**

**Capt. Sheldon Tausch**  
Emergency Field Office Pacific Palisades battle captain

Photo by Travis England

and disruption.

"We hear your concerns about traffic impacts," Swenson said. "We also recognize the hardship businesses in and along the impacted areas face due to ongoing traffic restrictions. While a full reopening of restricted roads is a top priority, we must balance that with the need for safe and expeditious debris removal."

## A Model for Future Response

Two thousand cleared properties later, leaders across the mission credit that progress to collaboration at every level.

"The continued success of the mission is rooted in teamwork with our federal, state, county and local partners," said Action Officer Jon Loxley.

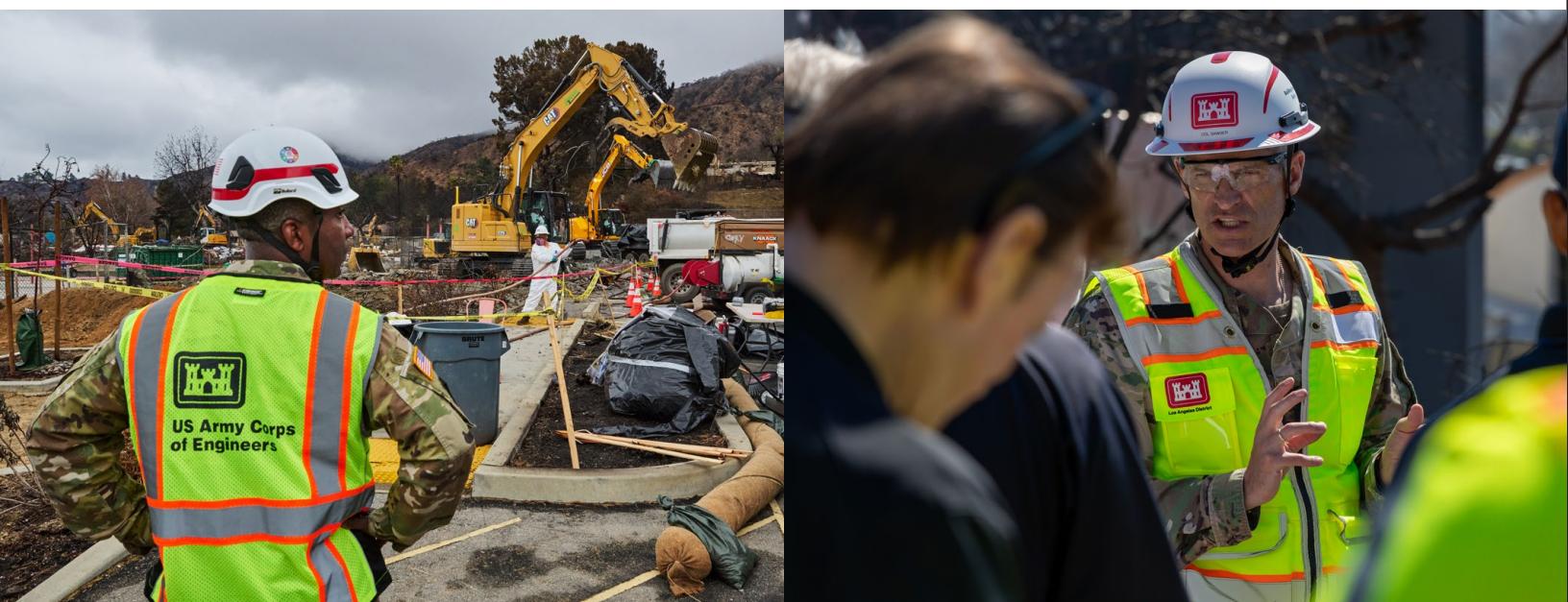
From FEMA headquarters to city halls, from digital modeling labs to school board meetings, USACE's wildfire recovery effort involved coordination across multiple levels of government and partner organizations.

"This mission is a testament to the power of collaboration and the extraordinary depth of expertise supporting USACE in delivering results for those impacted by the wildfires," Kelly said.

With partnership synchronized and lines of effort aligned, recovery efforts moved into the operational phase.



Col. Eric Swenson, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Recovery Field Office commander, speaks at a press conference Feb. 22, 2025, in Malibu, California, to provide updates on wildfire debris removal along the Pacific Coast Highway.



LEFT: Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deputy commanding general for civil works and emergency operations, observes debris-removal operations Feb. 6, 2025, during a visit to wildfire-impacted areas of Southern California. RIGHT: Col. Brian Sawser, commander of the USACE Emergency Field Office – Pacific Palisades, speaks with federal officials during a tour of wildfire-damaged communities Feb. 25, 2025, in Pacific Palisades, California.



Photo by Christopher Rosario

RIGHT: Col. Eric Swenson, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Recovery Field Office commander, speaks during a press conference Jan. 22, 2025, in Los Angeles. LEFT: Col. Jeffrey Palazzini, commander of the USACE Emergency Field Office – Pacific Palisades, left, and Lt. Col. Nathaniel Weander, deputy commander, center, join state Sen. Ben Allen at a Pacific Palisades community council meeting April 15, 2025, to discuss debris removal efforts in Pacific Palisades, California. USACE worked with local, state and federal partners, to include FEMA, as they supported survivors impacted by the Southern California wildfires.



Photo by Areca Davis



Col. Brian Sawser, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Emergency Field Office – Pacific Palisades, center, joins, from left to right, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, Los Angeles Unified School District Board Member Nick Melvin and a Palisades Elementary parent April 4, 2025, to announce the completion of debris removal at Los Angeles schools partially destroyed by recent Southern California wildfires in Pacific Palisades.



## Boots and Machines on the Ground

Photo by Travis England

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 56th chief of engineers, Lt. Gen. William "Butch" Graham Jr., middle-row center, along with Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly, second from right, Col. Brian Sawser, middle-row right, and Col. Eric Swenson, conduct a site walk March 12, 2025, at Marquez Charter Elementary School in Pacific Palisades, California.

**W**hat began as an emergency declaration soon became daily, disciplined work in neighborhoods, schools and along the coast. After FEMA's Jan. 17 mission assignment, USACE's recovery field offices in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades launched Phase 2 debris removal at priority public facilities by early February — clearing a path for communities to stabilize and rebuild.

"The start of Phase 2 marked a major milestone in the recovery process for residents impacted by the wildfires," Maj. Gen. Jason Kelly said earlier, noting the mission's "urgency, precision and care" and the strong collaboration with FEMA, the State of California, Los Angeles County and local jurisdictions.

"Clearing debris is the first step toward recovery, and we are committed to helping residents in communities across LA County rebuild," said Col. Eric Swenson, RFO commander.

On the ground, quality assurance

representatives and their supervisors set the tempo. The first quality assurance teams deployed Jan. 25 and kept long, exacting days, including 6 a.m. briefings, full shifts overseeing debris removal crews, and evening documentation to keep operations accountable and safe.

"It's a lot of taking photos, writing notes and uploading to our app," said architect and QA Tyler Heitkamp. "Seeing the real-time positive impacts we have on the people of Altadena ... is incredibly rewarding."

For QAS Tiffany Natvidad, the job means technical oversight and face-to-face service.

"Sometimes as a supervisor, you have to work with homeowners who are incredibly upset with losing their home and everything they've worked for all of their life," she said. "Being patient and helping explain their options to them is crucial."

By mid-April, nearly 9,000 rights of entry were in hand, signaling the immense scale and pace of work across the footprint.

Field execution also required sequencing heavy equipment operations with preservation efforts and safety protocols. In Pasadena Unified School District, crews began at two campuses to remove hazardous ash and debris under strict protocols. At Eliot Arts Magnet Academy, structural engineers assessed the fire-damaged auditorium while exploring whether a historic tower could remain as a community memorial.

"The first stage of the project is to see what part of the structure can be removed and what needs to remain in order to keep the building structurally stable," said civil/structural engineer Ian Buchanan.

In residential areas, arborists examined trees to identify what could be saved, recovered or needed to be removed for safety.

"We check the cambium, folium and xylem and make sure the tree is still alive," said local arborist Victor Velazquez.

After months without regrowth, even a few sprigs can be "response growth," he added,



Photo by Travis England

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contractor sprays water to control dust as heavy equipment removes fire-damaged debris March 1, 2025, in Malibu, California. USACE used strict environmental safety measures to minimize airborne hazards and protect public health during wildfire recovery operations.

indicating a tree is using its last stored energy and now poses a hazard.

Environmental and cultural resource specialists also advanced in lockstep with debris teams.

Archaeologist Katie Hill helped document site histories and flag sensitive features.

"Some tribal artifacts were identified, like historic trees," she said. "When that happens, we properly flag them for crews to look out for."

### Debris processing

Throughout the process, county partners coordinated with USACE for haul routes and disposal, EPA's Phase 1 household hazardous waste work opened access for USACE crews,

and local jurisdictions kept residents informed as traffic controls made room for heavy equipment. The work required daily coordination among agencies to adjust operations based on community needs and site conditions.

In the Palisades, USACE opened a debris processing site at Will Rogers State Historic Park, which helped reduce haul times and cut down on emissions by staging closer to affected neighborhoods.

"Using Will Rogers Park to recycle debris ... had a lot of advantages," said Col. Jeffrey Palazzini, which included intensive air monitoring, water trucks and dust-suppression measures that kept operations within strict safety thresholds. "Keeping our team and the local

community safe is our number one priority."

### Mission pace

Along the coast, the mission's pace resulted in visible milestones. Crews cleared the final FEMA-assigned parcel along the Pacific Coast Highway.

"Across the Palisades Fire footprint, we have removed over 1 million tons of debris and cleared more than 3,500 properties, including more than 230 parcels along the PCH," said Capt. Kyle Fleming. "This milestone reflects the tireless commitment and collaboration of everyone involved."

Behind every site visit and shift change was a team answering the call: deployed teammates, local hires, specialists and community leaders.



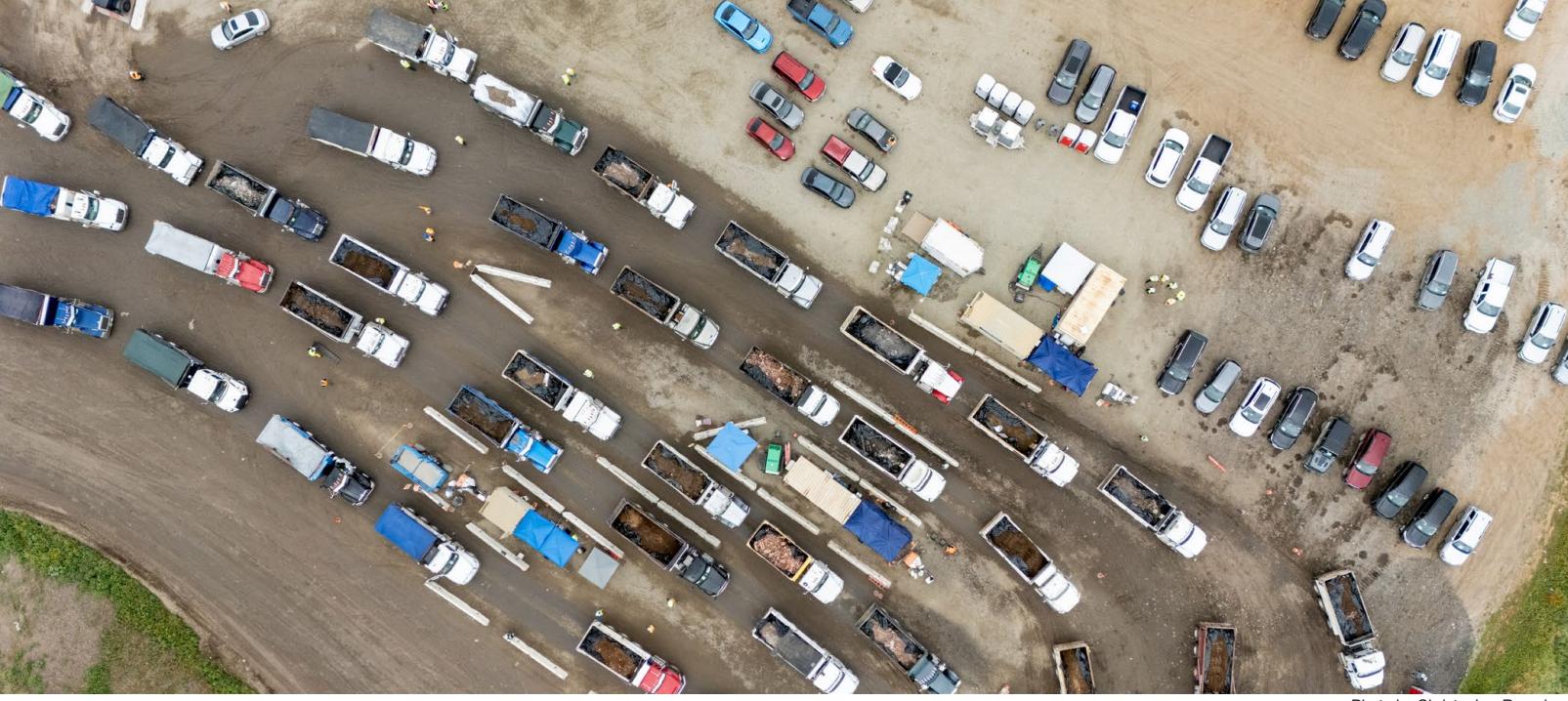


Photo by Christopher Rosario

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-contracted truck drivers supporting the wildfire debris removal mission take part in a safety day May 4, 2025, at the Simi Valley Transfer Station and Landfill in Southern California. The event featured safety handouts and lunch to recognize the drivers' continued contributions to recovery efforts.



Photo by Christopher Rosario

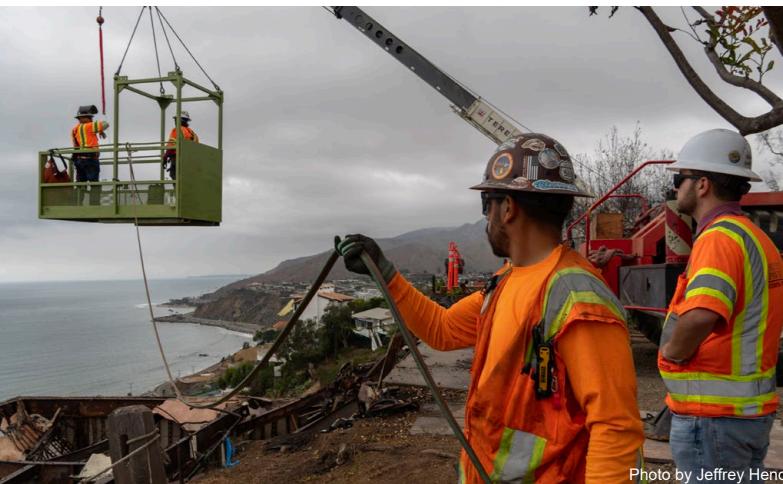


Photo by Jeffrey Henon



Photo by Christopher Rosario

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contractors begin debris removal at a parcel March 24, 2025, along the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, California.



Photo by Christopher Rosario



Photo by Christopher Rosario



Photo by Jeffrey Henon



Photo by Travis England

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Concrete and vegetative debris from fire-damaged properties are transported April 25, 2025, to Will Rogers State Historic Park, where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers established a temporary debris staging and reduction site to sort and reduce material, minimize trucking operations and accelerate recovery efforts. USACE and its contractors clear debris from a property damaged by the 2025 Pacific Palisades Fire using two cranes: one crane to suspend contractors who cut the steel structure with a torch, with the other crane hauling metal beams to the roadside, where trucks hauled them away for recycling. A contractor sprays water to suppress dust and ash, while crews clear debris from a wildfire-damaged site March 15, 2025, from a wildfire-damaged site in Malibu, California. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contractors work to clear debris March 15, 2025, from a wildfire-damaged site in Malibu, California.

**RIGHT:** Contractors conduct debris-removal operations March 1, 2025, at a fire-damaged property in Malibu, California. Crews used heavy equipment to secure debris for safe transport, ensuring environmental compliance and community recovery in challenging terrain. **LEFT:** Removing debris from the 2025 wildfires in the hills of Pacific Palisades is challenging, requiring USACE contractors to adapt to the steep terrain. To address this, contractors built a ramp to lift debris to the roadside, where it could be hauled away, while workers descending from ropes could dislodge the debris for their teammates below to gather.



## Faces of the Mission

Tina Shivel, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Critical Incident Stress Management peer supporter, left, talks to a contractor, right, June 4, 2025, at a debris removal site in Las Flores Canyon, California. USACE professionals worked with local, state and federal partners, to include FEMA, as they supported survivors impacted by the Southern California wildfires.

**B**ehind the heavy machinery, data systems and safety zones were people who gave the mission its heart. From the earliest days of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' wildfire debris removal mission, deployed specialists, engineers and liaisons served not just as responders

— but as neighbors, listeners and guides for communities rebuilding after the January fires.

Local government liaison Tony Porter understood that balance well. A veteran of multiple disaster responses, Porter arrived in mid-March to help survivors navigate the complex process of debris removal.

As one of USACE's liaisons, he bridged the gap between federal, state and local systems, helping residents understand next steps while

bringing empathy to difficult conversations.

"The local government liaisons are trained to swiftly establish credibility with the survivors to ensure effective communication and maintain trust with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers," Porter said.

Often meeting homeowners for the first time amid the ashes of their former homes, Porter listened to their stories and explained the path forward, property by property and family by family.

For many survivors, Porter represented the first tangible sign that recovery was underway.

Others on the mission translated their expertise into less visible forms of service. Roselle Pettit, an engineering technician from the Sacramento District, managed

the thousands of digital "load tickets" that tracked debris movement across the operation. Each ticket ensured proper documentation, environmental compliance and contractor payment. To improve accuracy for future teams, Pettit created a standard operating procedure for her section, complete with visual guides for identifying ticket errors.

"I ask myself how I can make the work better and what I can do to help," she said. "Having easy-to-follow instructions can help. I learned the Excel requirements just from screenshots."

On the ground in Altadena, Victor Velazquez, a local arborist, walked fire-damaged properties to assess which trees could safely remain.

His assessments required science and



Photos by Marti Allen

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Taylor Bayless, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers safety specialist with the Southern California wildfire emergency response effort in the Eaton Fire area, makes her rounds to various sites, ensuring crew safety and addressing near misses or mishaps in the field. Jerod Metz, a USACE quality assurance team member, inspects ongoing work at a project site, ensuring contractors meet performance standards during the emergency response mission. Victor Velazquez, a USACE-certified arborist, assesses wildfire-impacted properties, identifying hazardous trees for removal to help ensure site safety and protect new home rebuilds. Greg Gulley, a USACE project engineer, joins Velazquez to assess properties and identify hazardous trees for removal.

sensitivity, as each decision affected both safety and each homeowner's emotional connection to what survived the fire.

"Having local experts who know the soil, trees and vegetation of the area is crucial," Velazquez said. "Being able to tell homeowners what will and won't grow back ... is key to clearing land so survivors can move forward with rebuilding."

At the Pacific Palisades Emergency Field

Office, Capt. Sheldon Tausch brought a commander's eye for coordination and a Soldier's heart for service. As the first battle captain on the ground, Tausch built the operational framework that would be used throughout the mission — tracking progress, maintaining communication and synchronizing USACE's moving parts with contractors and local partners.

"Missions like this are what the Corps

does best," Tausch said. "We have decades of experience that allows us to think critically and solve complex problems safely and efficiently."

For Tausch, success is about people, not just metrics.

"It's about those moments — helping a family find their footing again," he said.

"That's the heart of what we do, it's why we keep pushing so hard and that is how we can move so fast."



## Human moments

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Nicholas Chambers stands at the site where his childhood home once stood before it was destroyed by the Eaton Fire, as he displays his late father's military medals that were recovered from the ashes. Darius Wallace, a USACE Los Angeles District employee, stands on his fire-damaged property as he awaits debris removal. Brian and Pamela Huges of Altadena, California, pause for a moment in front of residential debris April 17, 2025, following the Southern California wildfires. In this courtesy photo, Tina Segel, left, and her daughter, residents of Malibu, California, who lost their home in the Southern California wildfires, reflect on the strength and hope they found through the recovery process.

Even amid heavy machinery and long workdays, moments of personal connection emerged throughout the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' wildfire debris-removal mission. Across Altadena and the Pacific Palisades, engineers, contractors and residents shared experiences that reflected the human side of recovery.

### Standing with One of Their Own

When longtime U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District employee Darius Wallace lost his Altadena home in the Eaton Fire, the loss reached beyond his property line — it was felt throughout the USACE family. Wallace, a 43-year veteran and former Air Force firefighter, stood beside colleagues among the ashes of his home as leaders from the district and Task Force

Phoenix came to show their support.

"It's a little hard because it brings back memories of the house and what I used to see in the house," Wallace said, looking over the debris.

For Wallace, the hardest part wasn't the structure itself, but the memories it held, including family photos, coaching keepsakes and decades of personal history. After the loss, teammates gathered to support him and offered tangible reminders that he was not alone. Task Force Phoenix Commander Brig. Gen. William Hannan Jr., Los Angeles District Commander Col. Andrew Baker and others presented Wallace with new USACE gear and expressed their support during his recovery.

"I didn't imagine something like this," Wallace said. "I thought maybe it would be a few people, but then I saw the whole crew here. I'm just very appreciative. I'm just very grateful."

The gesture reflected the emphasis USACE teams placed on supporting one another throughout the mission.

### A Badge, a Father and a Moment of Grace

For Derek Russell Jr., the Eaton Fire destroyed more than a home; it damaged one of the last connections to his late father, a retired police officer and Army veteran.

When Russell met Col. Sonny Avichal, commander of the USACE Emergency Field Office – Eaton, he mentioned one wish: to recover his father's police badge from the debris. Avichal made a call to the Corps' contractor team, and within an hour, the badge was found — charred, but intact.

"To find this, amid all that debris ... it was my dad looking down," Russell said. "He helped them find it, for sure."



Col. Sonny Avichal, commander of the Emergency Field Office – Eaton, right, hugs Derek Russell Jr. after returning Russell's late father's police badge May 5, 2025, at the Southern California Wildfire Recovery Field Office building in Pasadena, California. The badge was recovered from the debris of Russell's home following the Eaton Fire in January 2025.

For Russell, the discovery became a symbol of survival.

"It literally tells a story of survival," he said. "Despite the condition of the badge, it survived the fire — like me. I survived the fire."

Avichal credited the contractor crew for their compassion: "At the end of the day, it's about the survivor. It's about care."

### A Tree Named Phoenix

In Malibu, Tina Segel and her family barely escaped the flames that consumed their home. When she returned to see only ashes, she felt certain rebuilding would be impossible. Within a day, however, her perspective changed, along

with her sense of hope.

During debris removal, Segel was struck by the care USACE crews showed, pausing whenever they uncovered something that might hold sentimental value. Among the remnants, one item stood out: a cross that survived the blaze. Nearby, a palm tree once thought to be dead showed new signs of life as green shoots began to emerge.

"The tree is very symbolic," Segel said. "God can make beauty from ashes, and this couldn't be more significant. There is hope, new life, new chapters ahead."

She smiled as she gave the tree a fitting name: Phoenix.

### Lives Behind the Lots

Not every story centered on recovered items. Some focused on newly formed relationships.

When Pamela and Brian Hughes of Altadena lost their home, it was the start of a long, uncertain journey. Between FEMA paperwork and searching for temporary housing, they said one steady source of hope came from USACE.

"I'm so glad the Corps is here," Pamela said. "People we've talked to are just so happy with how polite, patient and thorough they've been. I could not imagine this being done any better."

Her husband agreed. "This is the first positive step toward rebuilding since the fire happened," Brian said.



## Lifelines

Col. Eric Swenson, commander of the Southern California Wildfire Recovery Field Office, speaks with community members Feb. 17, 2025, as they rallied together to lift spirits, provide goods and support one another during two local events. Altadena hosted an Altadena Strong Community Workshop and Resource Fair with free pizza and many other goods and services, while the Upper Hasting Ranch Association hosted a “block party” event with free food trucks and many community services.

In disaster recovery, information can be as vital as equipment. For the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, communication served as a critical link connecting survivors, partners and teams throughout California’s largest wildfire debris removal mission. From neighborhood farmers markets to early-morning phone calls, outreach efforts focused on keeping communities informed and supported.

USACE’s Task Force Phoenix Community Outreach Team, led by Maj. Matthew Fletcher of the Rock Island District, became a familiar presence throughout the region. Since the mission began, its members have logged more than 10,000 engagements at community hubs such as post offices, farmers markets and recovery events. Their roles were part educator, part listener — walking survivors through the

process of debris removal, answering questions in multiple languages and ensuring no one felt left behind in the system.

“Every conversation matters,” Fletcher said. “Our mission is not just to share information, but to connect with people who’ve lost everything and help them understand what comes next.”

Behind the scenes, the communication network extended far beyond the field tents and folding tables. Inside a small office in Altadena, a team of call center volunteers fielded as many as 150 calls per day — each one a chance to guide a survivor toward clarity, reassurance or next steps. Among them was Kelly Simoneaux, a Sacramento District security specialist on her fourth deployment, who served as a voice of calm amid confusion.

Calls ranged from logistical questions to

moments of emotional distress. Some days, she helped survivors understand the debris removal process or clarify a mapping error; other days, she heard from residents who fell victim to scams. Simoneaux’s follow-ups went beyond protocol — she personally contacted county counterparts to make sure every caller’s story reached someone who could help.

“People just want to know they’re being heard,” she said. “Even if I have to refer them elsewhere, I make sure they know someone’s looking out for them.”

From community events to phone lines, the flow of information became a lifeline for recovery. It linked local, state and federal partners; it kept operations synchronized across thousands of parcels; and, most importantly, it restored a sense of connection for those navigating loss.



## Safety as Shared Responsibility

Brig. Gen. William Hannan Jr., commander of Task Force Phoenix, thanks truck drivers and distributes excellence stickers during a safety day May 4, 2025, at the Simi Valley Transfer Station and Landfill in Southern California. The event included safety information and lunch to recognize the critical role drivers play in wildfire debris removal operations across Southern California.

In the wake of a disaster, safety plays a central role in recovery operations. Every truck movement, debris-removal task and field decision depends on coordination and adherence to safety standards. Across Southern California’s wildfire debris-removal mission, that focus helped maintain steady progress and protect personnel.

For Taylor Bayless, a safety officer from the St. Louis District, that work took place on the ground. Fresh from a deployment to Lahaina, Hawaii, Bayless arrived in Altadena to help lead safety operations in the Eaton Fire zone, an area with layered hazards.

“From lead paint to asbestos, it’s no laughing matter,” she said. “The biggest danger is complacency — it’s when people stop paying

attention that they get hurt.”

Bayless described her role as a “checks-and-balances game,” keeping dozens of contractors and crews aligned on safety requirements that could vary from one property to the next. The work required frequent reminders, quick interventions and consistent communication in the field.

“People need someone to remind them that safety is important and to keep them accountable,” she said.

That approach extended across the operation, from heavy equipment yards to field offices. For Joey Gibbs, a safety and occupational health specialist from the St. Louis District, the pace of the mission required consistent attention to safety practices.

“Slow is smooth, smooth is safe,” he said.

Gibbs emphasized the importance of training sessions, site briefings and stand-downs as opportunities to reinforce expectations and build trust among crews.

“We all want the same thing — to efficiently and safely assist the survivors in getting their lives back,” he said.

Gibbs maintained a continuity binder containing safety information and lessons learned for future teams, with the goal of supporting consistency across missions.

Bayless and Gibbs approached safety from different roles within the operation, focusing on both day-to-day oversight and longer-term coordination. Their work reflected how safety considerations were integrated throughout the wildfire recovery mission.



## Taking Care of Responders

Photo by Charles Delano

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Zone Manager Rockie Sullivan with the Galveston District leads quality assurance personnel and contractors in warm-up and flexibility movements July 16, 2025, in Pacific Palisades, California.

**D**isaster response can take a toll not only on the communities affected, but also on the responders who show up to help them rebuild. Long hours, intense conditions and constant exposure to loss can weigh heavily on even the most experienced professionals. Recognizing this, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ensures the well-being of its own people remains part of the mission itself.

At the Palisades Emergency Field Office, Katie Reed was part of the team making sure of that. Normally, Reed works with the Environmental and Munitions Center for Expertise in Huntsville, Alabama, supporting environmental restoration at military installations. But on this deployment, her focus was people — specifically, helping them manage the emotional and psychological stress that can accompany operations.

As a peer supporter in the Critical Incident

Stress Management program, Reed helped USACE teammates process the challenges that come with high-pressure, high-stakes environments. CISM, she said, "is a crisis intervention system designed to help people manage emotional and psychological impacts of traumatic situations." That can mean everything from talking through stress reactions to teaching techniques for coping with anxiety and fatigue.

"Most often under stressful conditions, people forget or simply don't notice how they are being impacted by the surrounding conditions," Reed said. "It's always good to have folks looking in from the outside."

Reed said the signs of stress aren't always obvious — headaches, irritability, loss of sleep or appetite, difficulty concentrating — but they can build quickly, especially in a disaster zone.

"People can easily feel overwhelmed, have trouble concentrating and have a general

feeling of being 'on edge,'" she said.

To counteract that, Reed emphasized simple but vital habits: "Prioritize good sleep, get exercise and, in moments of immediate high anxiety, practice mindful breathing or meditation. Eating nutritious food and spending time with people you care about also is extremely helpful."

And, the need for care doesn't end when the mission does.

"Often it all catches up to folks when they return to their normal duties," Reed said. "The key is to take time for self-care and ease back into the routine."

For responders who needed support, the CISM team remained available 24/7 through the USACE helpline and email.

Because for every disaster USACE helps communities recover from, there's another, less-visible mission underway to ensure the people doing the helping can recover, too.



## The Arc of Progress

Photo by Stephen Baack

Col. Andrew Baker, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District, right, talks with Noland West, whose property was the last private property slated for debris removal, during a milestone event Aug. 26, 2025, in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles.

as crews cleared the site.

"This community has endured so much," said Lt. Col. David Weart, commander of the Eaton Area Emergency Field Office. "It has been our mission since January to help clear a path for recovery with expert technical skill and compassion."

That work was evident in Altadena, where the Outerbridge family's property became the final private debris-removal site in the Eaton Fire area. Standing beside the remains of her childhood home, Tami Outerbridge spoke about salvaged artwork and family memories

brought them to that moment.

Across both fire zones, the scale of progress was historic: more than 2.6 million tons of debris removed from more than 9,600 properties — the fastest debris mission in USACE history. But beyond the record numbers were the relationships forged with local, state and federal partners, who worked shoulder to shoulder to get it done.

"The work of the Army Corps cleared the way for healing — physically and emotionally — and gave our community the foundation to start over," said Los Angeles City Councilwoman Traci Park.



# Leadership Lessons

Col. Brian Sawser, commander of the Emergency Field Office – Pacific Palisades, speaks with federal officials Feb. 25, 2025, during a tour of wildfire-impacted areas in Pacific Palisades, California.

From the earliest days of the Southern California wildfires response, leadership emerged at multiple levels across the operation. In the Pacific Palisades and Eaton Fire debris-removal areas, personnel in command and field roles demonstrated a range of leadership approaches through decision-making, coordination and engagement with communities.

For Col. Brian Sawser, the first commander of the Pacific Palisades Emergency Field Office, the scope of the mission was significant. Thousands of destroyed properties, complex interagency coordination and a grieving community required both technical oversight and attention to people affected by the fires. His approach began, as he put it, “by defining the problem.” Once he understood the scale and constraints, he relied on team members, many with experience from previous disasters, to shape a collaborative mission.

“The mission was not just about clearing debris,” Sawser said. “It was about understanding the people, the survivors and their needs.”

Under his leadership, new leaders emerged. Engineers, safety officers and logisticians stepped forward to take ownership of evolving challenges. Even as deployments rotated and the tempo increased, Sawser fostered a culture where

initiative and compassion carried equal weight.

When Sawser passed the baton to Col. Jeff Palazzini — his friend, colleague and former West Point roommate — he left behind a team defined by resilience and shared purpose.

“The glory belongs to those who get in the arena,” Sawser told them. “I’ve been incredibly proud to serve alongside all of you.”

Lt. Col. Nate Weander, who served as deputy commander for the Palisades mission, carried that same philosophy into his leadership style. His mantra, “moving at the speed of trust,” became a guiding principle across the recovery effort.

“Think about it,” Weander said. “You’ve lost your home in a fire, and a guy in camouflage comes up and says, ‘Hey, I’m here to help.’ That’s going to be a hard sell. We’re moving at the speed of trust. It’s not just about debris removal; it’s about relationships.”

For Weander, leadership begins long before disaster strikes, through preparation, training and the partnerships that make rapid response possible. Whether clearing wildfire debris in California or reopening navigation channels after hurricanes in Louisiana, his approach is the same: build trust first, act with integrity and lead with calm precision when it matters most.

As operations progressed, those leadership lessons rippled outward. During a visit to the Palisades area, U.S. Military Academy cadets

Kailey Bacon and Quinn Healey shadowed Palazzini, Weander and their team, witnessing firsthand how leadership principles are applied in a field environment.

Palazzini emphasized the importance of unity across disciplines and agencies.

“Leadership skills make a big difference getting everyone to pull together in the same direction,” he said.

From seasoned commanders to emerging leaders, the message was consistent: There is no option for “too hard.” Communities are counting on USACE to deliver.

Each phase of the mission, from the first property cleared to final site visits with returning homeowners, reflected lessons developed during operations in Southern California. Leadership in the field involved balancing technical requirements with the needs of affected communities and adapting to conditions as they changed.

As rotations ended, field office commanders passed the torch. Sawser, before handing over leadership, reflected:

“I’ve heard stories that I’ll carry with me forever — stories of people who lost their homes of 50 years, who had no insurance and who now have nothing left but memories,” he said. “This mission has taught me so much about leadership, resilience and the importance of community.”



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 56th chief of engineers, Lt. Gen. William "Butch" Graham Jr., visits Marquez Charter Elementary School March 12, 2025, in Pacific Palisades, California. The site visit focused on assessing USACE's wildfire debris removal operations and ensuring safe recovery efforts in partnership with FEMA and local agencies.



# Looking Ahead

**U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contractors begin debris removal along the Pacific Coast Highway April 10, 2025, in Malibu, California.**

By August, ceremonies marked the final private property debris removals. Survivors, responders and officials gathered at symbolic sites to reflect on the journey.

In Altadena, at the Outerbridge property, Lt. Col. David Weart told guests:

“Today marks a key milestone from the recovery from the Eaton Fire. This community has endured so much since January, and it has been our mission since then to help clear a path for recovery with expert technical skill and compassion.”

In Pacific Palisades, Brig. Gen. John Lloyd praised the team:

“Across the two fire areas, USACE and its contractor teammates removed more than

2.5 million tons of debris from nearly 10,000 residential properties — the fastest debris removal mission in USACE history, completed with an outstanding safety record.”

Homeowner Noland West offered his heartfelt gratitude:

“I lost my house. I lost my brother’s house. I got away with the clothes on my back. There’s nothing to describe the feeling. It’s heart-wrenching. I miss my house in the worst way. Thank you to the Corps of Engineers. From the heart, thank you very much.”

By fall 2025, Task Force Phoenix began winding down operations, transitioning responsibilities back to USACE Los Angeles District.

Fire debris had been cleared, while

rebuilding efforts continued under local and state leadership. Col. Andrew Baker reflected on the broader significance of the work:

“The success here sets a benchmark for how quickly and safely wildfire debris can be cleared, not just in California, but across the nation.”

The Southern California wildfires of 2025 ranked among the most destructive disasters in the state’s history. The recovery effort also highlighted the role of coordination among agencies, the dedication of responders and the resilience of affected communities.

Across the operation, debris removal marked the completion of one phase of recovery, allowing communities to begin the next steps forward.

Photo by Christopher Rosario

## Closing Note:

*The Southern California Wildfires Recovery Special Edition was made possible through the dedication of every responder, partner, and community member who helped turn recovery into progress. The mission may conclude, but the lessons and leadership it inspired continue to guide the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in serving the nation — wherever and whenever we are needed.*

*In six months, more than 9,600 properties were cleared — making this the fastest large-scale wildfire debris removal in USACE*

*history. To date, USACE has removed more than 2.6 million tons of debris — the equivalent of more than 218,000 truckloads.*

*The success was the result of strong partnerships with FEMA, Cal OES, LA County, local governments and the affected communities. The factors driving the faster pace included early lessons-learned, strong interagency coordination, high homeowner participation and contractor capacity. This edition reflects months of dedication from the field, the office and every corner of the enterprise.*

*To everyone who shared their story and*

*their time — thank you. Your work reminds us that behind every mission are people helping people, and behind every milestone is a team united in purpose.*

*This special digital edition was developed with story and photo contributions from Task Force Phoenix and the Southern California Wildfires Recovery Field Office, as well as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District. Special thanks to the writers, photographers, editors, designers and public affairs professionals across the enterprise who helped tell the story of recovery, resilience and leadership in action.*

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Photo by Christopher Rosario

*This recovery sets a new benchmark for how quickly and safely wildfire debris can be cleared at scale in the U.S. More properties were cleared in less time than in any comparable wildfire recovery mission in recent history.*

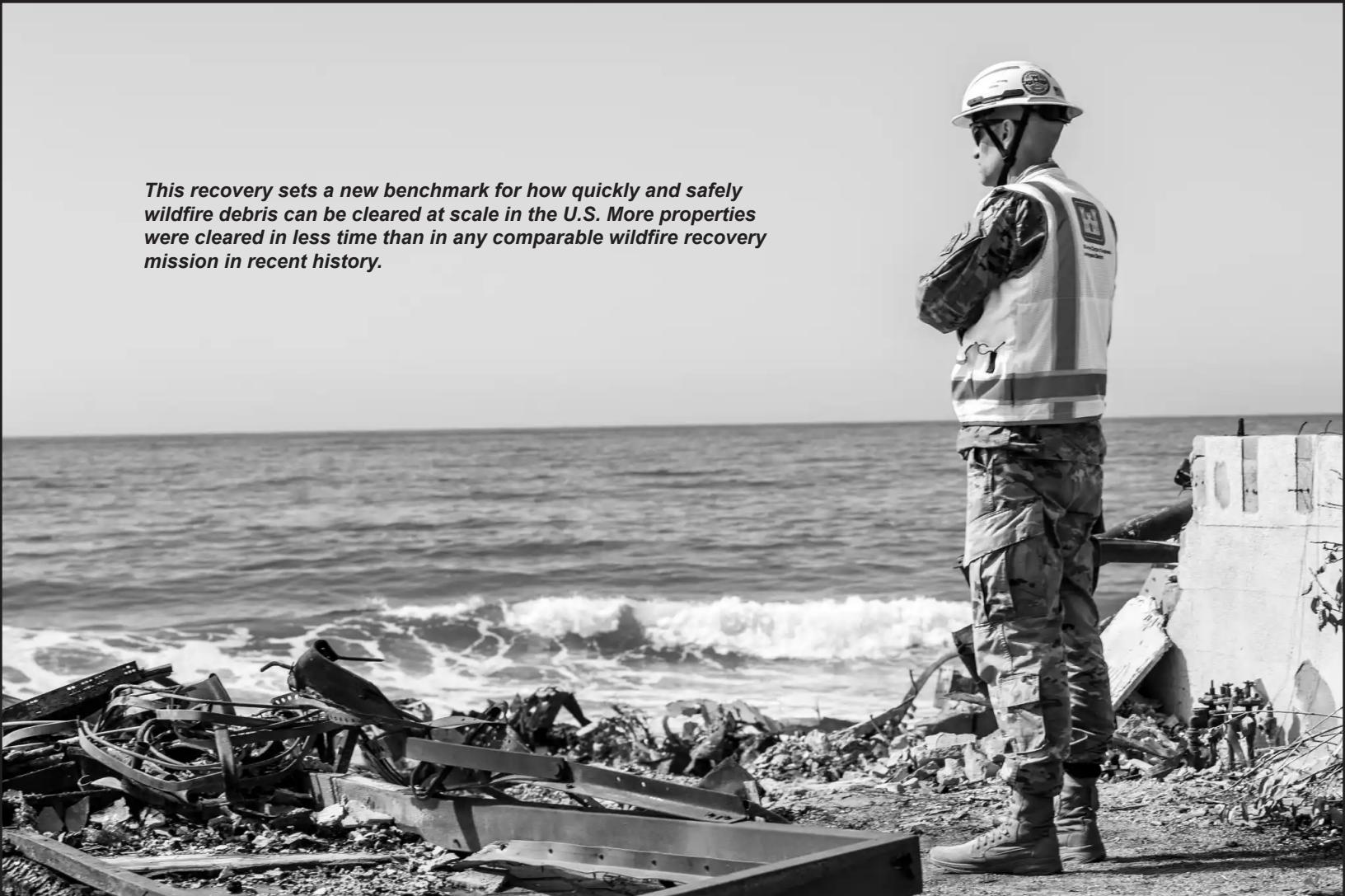


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