Fort Drum Press Release

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Fort Drum PW in-house workforce putting essential combat training range back in operation

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- From atop the Range 23 tower, the Fort Drum Directorate of Public Works crew could barely be seen over the hills and berms and across scattered target placements that have been fired upon countless times by Soldiers on the ground and in the air.

Gene Spencer, Fort Drum PW Operations and Maintenance chief, said that the crew may appear small in size but the range project they are working on is enormous in scope.

“Right now, we have 25 guys moving these 22,000-pound concrete sections into place, one after another, day in and day out,” he said. “When they are done, we’ll have replaced two 1,100-feet walls and an entire rail system behind it so we can provide real, situational combat effects for our Soldiers.”

Range 23 is an aerial gunnery and convoy live-fire range that can be configured for a variety of combined-arms training scenarios. Of the seven moving armor target (MAT) emplacements found throughout the range, the PW maintenance project is replacing two that have been battered and weakened over time from battlefield engagement and weather to the extent where they are no longer serviceable.

“To me, what makes this project so important for us is that every deploying unit validates their combat readiness at this range before they go,” Spencer said. “That’s why it is absolutely critical for this to be up and operational for our combat formations.”

Whenever Fort Drum PW and the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security use an in-house workforce on a maintenance or renovation project, it usually promises a significant time and cost savings. The Range 23 maintenance project is no exception.

“Contracting this work out would have closed Range 23 for more than a year,” said Norm McGuire, Fort Drum PW Business Operations and Integration Division chief. “That, coupled with an estimated cost savings of $2.2 million compared to contracting the work out is a win-win for our warfighters and the Army’s budget.”

Work began on May 1, and the range was expected to be closed for eight weeks. Now, it is anticipated that the project will be completed at least two weeks ahead of schedule.

“We were not expecting to be out of there until after the 4th of July, but we are way ahead of schedule,” Spencer said. “That’s just because of a lot of collaborative effort and team synergy.”

The bulk of the in-house workforce being used is from the PW Municipal Services Division, but additional support is provided by the PW Business Operations and Integration Division to secure all of the materials and resources required for the project, engineers to design the layout for a better MAT system, masons to bind the concrete wall sections in place, and electricians to wire the remote-controlled moving target systems.

Additionally, the Environmental Division conducted wetland delineations on the range to obtain the needed New York State Department of Environmental Conservation permit before the project began.

“Basically, this is an all-hands project reaching every part of Public Works,” Spencer said. “We are one of the few in-house workforces across the Army. I bet you won’t find another installation doing this level of work with the level of coordination we had to do to even consider starting a project like this.”

Greg Miller and Jeff Semrau serve as Roads and Grounds supervisor and site foreman, respectively.

“We have 113 panels for each wall,” Miller said. “And each truck can carry three concrete panels at a time.”

Every time a truck brings a new load, the crew immediately begins attaching hooks to the panel for the crane to hoist it into place.

“From the time we hook it, they can have it set and leveled in about nine minutes,” Miller said. “We are averaging five pieces per hour. We had a good day yesterday placing 51 panels after our guys put in a 12-hour day.”

Miller said that if the crew is efficient and focused, it is because the Army needs them to be.

“We have a unit that needs to go somewhere, and so they need to pre-qualify on this range soon,” he said.

Operating with a skeleton crew means that being short one worker – and it occasionally happens when a babysitter cancels or someone falls ill – is not going to impact performance, but two or more absentees in a day could set them back.

“If that happens, then it hurts,” Miller said. “One less person filling in the wall, setting rail tracks or hauling stone. There’s enough work that everybody is spread out and not on top of each other.”

Spencer noted that a larger operation is happening all around Range 23 while the crew of 25 employees is diverted to this project.

“We still have all the other stuff that we do as part of installation readiness,” he said. “That includes maintaining all the tank trails and roads on the cantonment area. There are people mowing the ranges that enable units to train here whenever they want. So that stretches our workforce thin. We have the incredible skill sets to do this type of range project, but we have to be careful managing our resources.”

The Roads and Grounds team has close to 100 seasonal employees to select from for this particular project.

“When we were looking at this job over the winter, we built this crew from people who wanted to put in the time necessary to get this done on schedule,” Miller said. “These guys all were on board, and every one of them asked to be a part of this.”

Additionally, Semrau said they were looking for people with the experience required for this labor-intensive range maintenance project.

“With the level of expertise they have, all with varying backgrounds needed for a big project like this, they can do just about anything,” he said. “Some have years in construction or carpentry experience – and when you bring all of that together, you can see why things are going so well.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Mario Terenas, for one, is pleased to hear that Range 23 is nearing operational status again. The 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum senior enlisted adviser said that Soldiers spend a lot of time here honing and testing their skills in the training area. Having a range offline, even temporarily, gets noticed by the troops.

“When you spend as much time in the field as 10th Mountain Division Soldiers do, they become real familiar with the ranges, and they even tend to favor one over another,” Terenas said. “Range 23 is undeniably one where they get the realistic, joint fire capabilities needed to demonstrate combat readiness. We are greatly appreciative of the dedicated PW professionals who are putting thousands of hours into this project for us.”

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Media with inquiries regarding this press release should contact Fort Drum Public Affairs, Katie Wright at 315-772-9043 or katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil.

Photo Captions:

Range23\_1 - Fort Drum’s Directorate of Public Works’ in-house work crew moves 22,000-pound concrete sections into place May 25 at Range 23. When the job is complete, they will have replaced two 1,100-feet walls and an entire rail system that make up a moving armor target (MAT) emplacement. Range 23 is an aerial gunnery and convoy live-fire range that can be configured for a variety of combined-arms training scenarios. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Range23\_2 - Fort Drum’s Directorate of Public Works’ in-house work crew moves 22,000-pound concrete sections into place May 25 at Range 23. When the job is complete, they will have replaced two 1,100-feet walls and an entire rail system that make up a moving armor target (MAT) emplacement. Range 23 is an aerial gunnery and convoy live-fire range that can be configured for a variety of combined-arms training scenarios. (Photo by Fort Drum Directorate of Public Works) (Courtesy)

Range23\_3 - Fort Drum Directorate of Public Works’ in-house workforce has the essential skills and experience to deliver a major maintenance project on Range 23 ahead of schedule and with a significant cost savings. Range 23 is an aerial gunnery and convoy live-fire range that can be configured for a variety of combined-arms training scenarios, and it is critical to Soldier readiness in the 10th Mountain Division (LI). (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs) (Michael Strasser)