

Community, experts gather to discuss water  
Sept. 30, 2014

About 75 people attended a town hall meeting held Sept. 30 at Warrior Community Center. The town hall focused on Fort Polk's water operations, and was the culmination of an assessment of Fort Polk water operations by an independent third party: The U.S. Army Public Health Command (USAPHC) conducted here Sept. 15-19.

During that assessment, requested by Brig. Gen. William B. Hickman, Joint Readiness Training Center and Fort Polk commander, and Col. T. Glenn Moore, garrison commander, USAPHC experts took a variety of water samples. Those findings and ongoing improvements to the water system here were topics of discussion at the town hall.

Concerns about water quality on Fort Polk began to rise in fall of 2013 when the results from lead testing at installation schools and child development centers and the results from lead and copper testing at North Fort housing were distributed within the same month.

Since then, ongoing challenges with water discoloration in barracks rooms and housing units have caused even more frustration. The town hall's goal was to provide information and address attendees' concerns.

On hand were representatives from the USAPHC, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (LDHH), American Water, medical experts from USAPHC and Fort Polk, representatives from the Directorate of Public Works and Corvias Military Living.

Hickman opened the session by thanking those who "took time out of their busy schedules to attend" and asked participants to help spread the word about what they learned at the meeting. "The Fort Polk families here tonight represent the streets (and neighborhoods) where they live. There are Soldiers here who are also facility managers -- and they represent the barracks that they manage. Take this information back with you so we can all have a clear understanding of what's going on with Fort Polk's water system and the way forward."

Up next was Moore, who emphasized the command's commitment to the community's quality of life. "Our number one priority is for the health and safety of the Fort Polk community whether it's the Soldiers and families who live on Fort Polk or the civilians and contractors who work here."

Moore said that he understands the frustration felt by the community over the past 18 months. "I know it's important for you to feel confident that we have your best interests at heart, and we do. I want to state right up front that the water supply on Fort Polk is in full compliance with all federal and state drinking water standards to

include the lead and copper rule. You're going to hear that from the experts tonight," he said.

The command also realizes, said Moore, that there is much work to do in the coming months to correct the issues leading to discolored water in housing and the barracks. "We have a number of ongoing and upcoming projects that American Water is working on and IMCOM (Installation Management Command) has funded which are going to eliminate the 'brown water' over the next 12 months. The bottom line is that we want to give your families a safe place to live with the water you receive -- both medically and aesthetically. That goes for every Soldier, family member, civilian employee and contractor who lives or works here."

Topics presented at the town hall meeting included:

- Essential information such as who sets drinking water safety standards, what types of water sampling are required and how sampling is performed, presented by Bob Dohoney, American Water.
- Technical assessment by the USAPHC team included findings on the North and South Fort housing water systems and review of planned and ongoing improvements, presented by Steve Clark, Environmental Engineer. Also from the team was Dr. Charles E. McCannon, M.D., who discussed the medical approach and health-risk findings. Andrea Clark, health risk communication specialist, spoke about upcoming initiatives to increase effective communication to the Fort Polk community.
- Sean Nolan, LDHH, explained the roles and responsibilities of his department, the difference between action levels and maximum containment level goals, as well as the LDHH assessment of how Fort Polk is doing.

## **The findings**

### ***Among the USPHC findings:***

1. Fort Polk water is safe and fully compliant with the Safe Drinking Water Act and the lead and copper rule. It meets all state and federal standards.
2. Lead and copper corrosion is not excessive; and planned improvements will be successful.
3. Acknowledgement that discolored water is aesthetically displeasing, but not hazardous to health, and American Water is on track with ongoing and planned improvements.
4. Acknowledgement that the drinking water is safe, but Fort Polk and American Water officials and USAPHC experts agree that there is work to be done, that the Fort Polk community should have water quality that is aesthetically beyond the standards.

5. The health risk from lead in Fort Polk drinking water is low and blood lead levels cannot be linked to drinking water lead levels with certainty.

6. North Fort housing water system findings: Lead and copper were below EPA action levels. Three results had lead levels above 15 parts per billion (ppb). Primary contributing factors to these findings: A change in water source pH (from well 16 which has been taken off line until treatment can be applied). Also a factor is water age (the length of time it takes for water to leave the well and reach the end source).

7. Projects American Water has in place (or future projects) are on track and in keeping with water systems nationwide.

8. Medical facts: Out of the more than 500 children tested for blood-lead levels at Fort Polk, only five were flagged for follow-up. The lead source for three of those children was determined to have occurred in an urban area before the family moved to Fort Polk. Of the children followed on the installation there are NONE whose blood lead levels have risen since being on Fort Polk.

## **The fixes**

American Water has a number of ongoing and upcoming projects that USAPHC officials state will eliminate discolored water in the barracks and housing within the coming year. These include:

- The looping project: Lines that lead from North Fort housing hydrants are being replaced with primarily 8-inch lines (currently the lines are 1.5 inches), with dead ends “looped” into another main from another cul-de-sac, and so on. In the three cul-de-sacs (out of the 27 on North Fort), where dead-end lines have no viable connections, automatic water flushers will be installed. “Instead of having a dead end situation (per cul-de-sac) we’ll have a large loop where all the houses are tied in .... we will have better water flow by connecting to a main at each end of the loop, virtually eliminating the current dead end situation. That’s going to make a huge difference,” said Dohoney.
- A corrosion inhibition system (already funded). The corrosion inhibition system raises water pH levels which helps prevent the degradation of plumbing fixtures inside buildings.
- American Water will also place mixers in the elevated outdoor red and white water storage tanks located on the installation. The mixers enhance water quality and treatment. The goal is to improve water flow and enhance water quality. Design plans are in progress.

Fort Polk ‘s water system is fed by several wells (two different aquifers that flow underground). Historically, well water contains higher levels of iron and manganese, said Dohoney. “Iron and manganese are not harmful to human health. They can

make the water turn brown and discolored. “Those elements are normally dissolved in water but if placed in contact with air or chlorine the manganese and iron may turn insoluble which may discolor the water,” Dohoney said. On Fort Polk, the State requires that all water be disinfected with chlorine, which is a common practice throughout the water industry. However the potential for discolored water has prompted designs for future iron and manganese removal options.

Another ongoing program is the replacement of main water lines by American Water (the lines that go out into the main thoroughfares of Texas and Louisiana, some of which were installed in the 1940s). In the six years since Fort Polk’s water operations were privatized to American Water, Dohoney said, more than 30,000 linear feet of main line has been replaced. This year alone, 14,000 linear feet will be replaced with new line.

## **Communicating with community**

During the town hall meeting, Fort Polk and USAPHC officials acknowledged that there was room for improvement in how information about water is disseminated to the community. Initiatives that will be put in place include:

1. A web site repository where community members can get water sampling results, water improvement updates, and other needed information.
2. Videotaping (and posting of future town hall videos).
3. Detailed minutes of this and future town halls.
4. Provide newcomers to Fort Polk with information about water issues (handout or brochure).
5. Regular updates to consumers through e-mail: Status of projects, monthly number of complaints, what type.
6. Live real time map board in the neighborhood housing office showing the ongoing work status in North Fort so that the families can track progress.