



MEDIA ADVISORY

Distinguished Visitor Day Celebrates Progress and Partnership on Catalina Island

*Elected Officials and Military Leaders Discuss Beneficial Training Mission at
Catalina Island Conservancy's Airport in the Sky*

LONG BEACH – (March 2, 2019) – The Catalina Island Conservancy, elected officials, military leaders from the Department of Defense, U.S. Marine Corps and Navy, as well as community representatives gathered March 1 for Distinguished Visitor Day to observe progress in repairing the ACE Clearwater Airfield at the Conservancy's Airport in the Sky on Catalina Island. The Runway Repair Project, conducted as an Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Project through the Department of Defense, is at its midpoint, with approximately 100 Marines and Navy Sailors (Seabees) working to replace asphalt with concrete and simultaneously training for similar future missions.

The partnership with the Marines and Navy to repair the runway began after nearly 18 months of collaboration with the Conservancy and with the help of U.S. Rep Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Congressman Lowenthal and California State Assemblymember Patrick O'Donnell attended Distinguished Visitor Day, as well as District Deputy Jeanette Christian representing California State Senator Dianne Feinstein, Chief of Staff Samuel Liu representing California State Senator Ben Allen, Field Deputy Herlinda Chico from the office of LA County 4th District Supervisor Janice Hahn, Los Angeles County Aviation Commissioner Ryan Antoon and Avalon Mayor Pro Tem Cinde MacGugan-Cassidy, among others.

"I've heard about the need and have seen the need to fix the airport runway for many years," said Congressman Lowenthal, who credited his staff with championing the project. "This is a wonderful model."

"It's really what we do best: (to) share and build on resources together," he added. "I'm pleased to see this life cycle of so many years come to fruition."

The Airport in the Sky operates as a public airport, serving the Island's 4,000 residents, businesses and approximately 1 million annual visitors. It is an historic and critical asset, providing essential access to Catalina Island for first responders, travelers, residents and businesses as well as US Mail and other shipping carriers.

"The repair of the newly named ACE Clearwater Airfield will ensure that the Island's only airport remains open for many years to come to serve the local community. We needed to find a way to improve its durability and give it a long future. We're very proud to collaborate with I MEF, I Marine Expeditionary Force to make it all come together," said Tony Budrovich, Catalina Island Conservancy president and CEO.

“The participation of the distinguished visitors combine with our stakeholders to validate the great work of the Conservancy on Catalina Island.”

Several military personnel, including Navy Commodore Daryll Long (1NCR), attended Distinguished Visitor Day. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense at Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness Judd Lyons, who oversees the IRT Program, and U.S. Air Force Captain Kelly Machado traveled from the Pentagon to observe progress.

“It is so important that we maintain ties with our communities, and projects such as these allow us to do that. They benefit those in uniform by honing and exercising their skills and preparing them for deployments and contingency operations, but the tie in to the local community is a benefit as well,” said DASD Lyons.

IRT, which pairs community needs with military training opportunities, proved to be an ideal way to partner to repair the 3,000-foot runway and offer a unique training exercise for local troops.

“With us, what we focus on, is probably the most difficult engineering task that you see in the military; and that is the ability to create an airfield anywhere that it can be created and where it’s needed,” said Colonel Matthew Seay of Marine Wing Support Squadron 37, who spoke to how training in unfamiliar environments helps prepare the troops should they need to do a similar project in the future. “Whenever we get a chance to pick up our capabilities and move them somewhere – that’s good for us.”

The project is a group effort, with I MEF at Camp Pendleton assigning 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (3rd MAW) from Marine Corps Air Station Miramar to support the training opportunity. Marine Wing Support Squadron 373 (MWSS-373) serves as the lead element for the successful repair of the runway. Personnel from Naval Construction Group One (NCG1), First Naval Construction Regiment (1NCR) and Navy Mobility Construction Battalion (NCMB-25) also participate with quality control and medical support.

Brigadier General Rick Uribe (I MEF) called the project “a great benefit not only for you, but for us. The one thing that is most challenging for the MEF command is training these marines and sailors, and this is providing a great training venue in a place that we’re not getting shot at, so that is kind of a benefit. The challenge is there to make our marines better at what they do. Building a runway like this at this magnitude, to my knowledge, is something we’ve never done before.”

More than 100 Marines and Seabees have been hard at work since December, keeping the project on schedule despite heavy rains. To date, runway repair is more than 50-percent complete.

“It’s a unique project for a unique place performed in a unique way,” said Patrick O’Donnell, Dist. 70 California State Assembly. “I think today proves that we have very qualified fighting men and women but they do more than fight: They make communities a better place.”

About the Airport in the Sky

The Airport in the Sky is a historical and critical asset that provides access to Catalina Island via air for first responders, travelers, residents and businesses. The airport is the Island’s U.S. Mail and package delivery hub. An estimated 3.5 million pounds of freight, which includes medical and emergency supplies, are also shipped

through the airport annually. The airport opened in 1946, and the Catalina Island Conservancy took over its operation in 1972, when the Conservancy was formed. The Conservancy operates the Airport in the Sky as a public airport. It is a favorite destination for pilots, who land and take off from the airport about 14,000 times annually.

About the Airport Runway Repair Project

The airport's main landing strip has required frequent patching, costing the Conservancy about \$250,000 annually in labor and materials. The California Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) Aeronautics Division issues a public use permit for the airport and annually inspects the Airport in the Sky's runway. Caltrans had told the Conservancy that it needed a long-term repair plan in place by September 2018 to continue to operate the facility as a public airport.

Following two years of planning, military equipment arrived on Catalina in December 2018. Over 100 Marines and Seabees arrived on Catalina Island and began work in January to perform the training mission. They have been living in a tent encampment at the Airport in the Sky since then, and they have been working almost every day – weather permitting – to repair the runway.

About the Catalina Island Conservancy

Formed in 1972, the Catalina Island Conservancy is one of California's oldest land trusts. Its mission is to be a responsible steward of its lands through a balance of conservation, education and recreation. Through its ongoing efforts, the Conservancy protects the magnificent natural and cultural heritage of Santa Catalina Island, stewarding approximately 42,000 acres of land and more than 60 miles of rugged shoreline. It provides access to the Island's wildlands and 50 miles of biking and nearly 165 miles of hiking opportunities within its road and trail system. The Conservancy conducts educational outreach through two nature centers, its Wrigley Memorial & Botanic Garden and guided experiences in the Island's rugged interior. Twenty miles from the mainland, the Island is a treasure trove of historical and archaeological sites. It also contains numerous rare and endangered animals and plants. The Island is home to 60 species – and counting – that are found only on Catalina. For additional information, please visit www.catalinaconservancy.org.





Photos feature Catalina Island Conservancy, military personnel and elected officials on Distinguished Visitor Day, March 1, at the Conservancy's Airport in the Sky, the only airport on Catalina. U.S. Marine Corps Photo by Lance Cpl. Juan Anaya. Photo courtesy of the Catalina Island Conservancy. Please contact us if you need additional photos.

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