



2020 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards Environmental Restoration, Individual/Team Award

Each year since 1962, the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) has honored installations, teams, and individuals for outstanding achievements in Department of Defense (DoD) environmental programs. These accomplishments include outstanding conservation activities, innovative environmental practices, and partnerships that improve quality of life and promote efficiencies without compromising DoD's mission success. The 2020 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards cycle encompasses an achievement period from October 1, 2017, through September 30, 2019 (Fiscal Year (FY) 2018-2019). A diverse panel of 54 judges with relevant expertise representing Federal and state agencies, academia, and the private sector evaluated all nominees to select one winner for each of the nine categories. These nine categories cover six subject areas including natural resources conservation, environmental quality, sustainability, environmental restoration, cultural resources management, and environmental excellence in weapon system acquisition.

About the Environmental Restoration, Individual/Team Award

The Environmental Restoration, Individual/Team award recognizes individuals and teams for efforts to protect human health and the environment by cleaning up hazardous substances, pollutants or contaminants, and munitions in a timely, cost-efficient, and responsive manner. Restoring these sites impacted by past DoD activities protects military personnel, their families, and the public from potential human health, environmental, and safety hazards. The 2020 winner of the Environmental Restoration, Individual/Team award is the *Vieques Environmental Restoration Team, Puerto Rico*.

About the Vieques Environmental Restoration Team, Puerto Rico

Vieques Naval Installation is a former Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Area in Vieques, Puerto Rico, now listed on the National Priorities List for cleanup under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act. The former installation spans 23,000 acres with another 12,000 acres of surrounding waters. Environmental restoration in Vieques remains the highest priority and costliest project in the Navy's Munitions Response Program, largely due to unique challenges associated with unexploded ordnance, environmental contaminants, and ecologically and culturally sensitive resources. The Vieques Environmental Restoration Team



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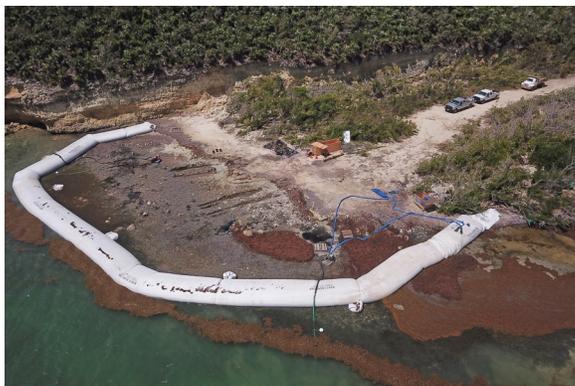
includes representatives from Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of the Interior, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The Team works to develop and implement innovative approaches to safely and cost-effectively achieve the collective cleanup objectives of all stakeholders, including opening areas for public recreation and granting access to culturally significant sites.

Major Accomplishments in FY 2018-2019

- Following the devastation in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria in September 2017, the Vieques Environmental Restoration Team immediately responded to ensure public safety. Personnel inspected areas where munitions may have become exposed, disseminated munitions safety information, established satellite telecommunications, distributed emergency supplies, helped the community remove debris, and repaired mission-critical roads, fences, safety signs, and infrastructure. These efforts allowed the Team to resume full environmental restoration cleanup activities in December 2017, less than three months after the hurricane, despite continued island-wide outages of most services and supplies.
- To address a significant public concern, the Vieques Environmental Restoration Team coordinated with the EPA and the Navy's Radiological Affairs Support Office to use highly sensitive radiological instruments to find and remove previously undetected depleted uranium (DU) projectiles in a former training area. The instrument readings and soil sample results, including samples collected by the EPA, demonstrated that the DU removals successfully remediated all potential radiological risk.
- The Team temporarily deployed a water-filled cofferdam to isolate and dewater a munitions removal area. This innovative approach allowed unexploded ordnance (UXO) technicians to successfully remove munitions in a terrestrial setting without the need for UXO divers. The cofferdam exposed many large, heavy, encrusted munitions that the technicians safely removed using a remote excavator. These procedures accelerated the cleanup effort while increasing the safety of the operation.
- The Vieques Environmental Restoration Team deployed UXO and scientific divers to locate and photograph hundreds of underwater munitions around the island. Personnel compared post-Hurricane Maria munitions locations to historical locations recorded during underwater investigations prior to the hurricane. This analysis indicated that Hurricane Maria did not cause widespread lateral movement of munitions, and most munitions remained in place. This information has major implications for the management and cleanup of underwater munitions across the entire DoD Military Munitions Response Program because it indicates that significant natural events are not expected to impact the long-term management of underwater sites.
- The Vieques Community Involvement Program is a groundbreaking, collaborative effort among the Navy, regulatory agencies, and other stakeholders to engage the public and transfer environmental restoration best practices. The Navy sponsored a first-of-its-kind Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fair at the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge that brought together students, parents, teachers, the Navy, USFWS, and other stakeholders to engage all Vieques high school students on STEM education and opportunities.



Immediately following Hurricane Maria's devastation, Vieques Environmental Restoration Team members volunteered to support emergency response in the community, including clearing debris and fallen trees from public areas and delivering munitions safety information along with much-needed supplies to Vieques residents. Pictured: Jose Ramos Jr. (standing), USA Environmental, UXO Technician III; and Juan Melendez (operating backhoe), USA Environmental, Deforester II.



Innovative use of a temporary, water-filled cofferdam significantly enhanced the safety and efficiency of operations to remove munitions located just offshore. The cofferdam allowed the site to be dewatered, such that UXO technicians successfully removed munitions without the need for UXO divers, thus accelerating the cleanup while increasing the safety of the operation.