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ARMY ENVIRONMENTAL COMMANDER VISITS PTA

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POHAKULOA TRAINING AREA, Hawaii— Col. Michael O’Keefe, commander, U.S. Army Environmental Command, accompanied by Alvin Char, chief, U.S. Army Garrison-Hawaii, DPW Environmental Division, and Michael Harada, chief, Environmental Programs, IMCOM-Pacific, visited this training area on June 6. O’Keefe’s visit was an essential part of his U.S. Army Garrison (USAG)-Hawaii itinerary.

“The Army Environmental Command supports the environmental work at Army installations, such as PTA, and this is my effort to get out and see all the great efforts that are being done, but it is also my way to find out other ways where I get back and see how I can help the Army’s environment,” O’Keefe said.

O’Keefe first visited PTA 27 years ago as a lieutenant. He said it’s interesting to come back and view the area through an “environmental lens.” He said he sees PTA as an important training area.

“I think, first and foremost, PTA is an invaluable training area for the Army in Hawaii and also for the other services. It’s an area where, very clearly, the Army has to do a number of things to take care of the environment.”

He continued, “It’s got a lot of natural and cultural resources, and it is clear to me that the Army is stepping up to do all the right things to take care of Hawaii’s valuable resources,” he added.

At the hill, better known as Pu’u Pohakuloa, PTA staff members Deckey Lopez, DPTM range operations supervisor, and Tom Carll, DPW supervisory general engineer, gave Col. O’Keefe a brief overview of PTA’s cantonment area and ranges, including Bradshaw Army Airfield.

After a short stop to see the inside of one of the 1950s-built, Quonset hut-style barracks and a modern soldiers barracks, PTA Natural and Cultural Resources staff, led by Bill Godby, PTA archaeologist, and Lena Schnell, natural resources program

manager, gave the environmental commander, an updated brief on the area's natural and cultural resources.

Lt. Col. Warline Richardson, commander, USAG-Pohakuloa, gave the command brief, discussing the installation's mission, operations and various support activities.

Later, PTA's environmental staff accompanied Col. O'Keefe to its Pohakuloa Interpretive Garden, which exhibited Hawaii's unique natural and cultural resources, such as several of Hawaii's 15 threatened and endangered plant species, a small fire pit, and even a replica of a religious shrine.

The highlight of the day was the environmental tour of PTA's Silene enclosure, in the vicinity of Deadman's Curve and nearby cultural sites.

At the sites, Col. O'Keefe was able to see first hand how early Hawaiians used the area, such as lava tunnel shelters that were used to protect them from the harsh natural elements and visited PTA areas where modern-day goats and pigs roam the area.

Col. O'Keefe, who holds a doctorate and masters' degree in chemistry (biochemistry), a master of science in national resource strategy, and a master of business administration, understands the importance of an environmental staff at Army installations, such as Pohakuloa Training Area.

"They are essential as the Army has compliance requirement, from across the spectrum of pollution prevention to natural and cultural resource preservation. More importantly, full efforts in environmental work have been shifting over the years to put a stronger emphasis on sustainability," Col. O'Keefe said.

"What we want to do is, not much what we have to do to prevent violating the law or getting a fine, but we want to be able to set the conditions so that we have training areas where Soldiers, Marines, and other services can train for generations into the future where there are training opportunities available because we thought through the long term on how to take care of all the resources that we have here and keep them viable," he added.

A significant relationship between the environment and today's Army, which has a dual responsibility of fulfilling its mission to train the force and its duty to protect the environment.

"Soldiers on the ground are called 'boots in the mud,'" Col. O'Keefe said. "Here, they are 'boots in the lava dust.'

"Soldiers need to have a place to train. It is the moral responsibility of our country to properly train Soldiers into battle," he continued. "and to do that is by having a training installation that prepares our young patriotic folks to be properly trained when they do have to deploy and fight."

We also have the responsibility to be good neighbors with the communities around us because we are paid for with taxpayers' money, and we are responsible to the American people, O'Keefe said.

We try to do the right things that are essential to the future, and try to be very responsible on how we spend taxpayers' dollars, he added.

MEDIA NOTE: For more information, call Chicpaul Becerra, Pohakuloa Training Area Public Affairs Liaison Officer, at (808) 969-2411.