

PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA



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Papahānaumokuākea Islands Mostly Spared by Tropical Storm Neki

A U.S. Coast Guard overflight of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument on Saturday revealed Tropical Storm Neki caused no apparent damage to the field station islands and facilities within its path. The storm, which once had been a Category 3 hurricane, passed through the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands from Friday to early Saturday.

“We were expecting the worst at Tern Island in French Frigate Shoals,” said Susan White, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Superintendent for Papahānaumokuākea. “The aging buildings and the seawall have been there for a long time, and we were worried about their structural integrity.”

All of the personnel on Tern Island and Laysan Island were evacuated last Wednesday as the hurricane approached. The Coast Guard removed from Tern Island with a C-130 aircraft, and the NOAA Ship *Oscar Elton Sette* picked up the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service personnel stationed on Laysan Island.

The Coast Guard flight on Saturday carried Fish and Wildlife, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and State of Hawai‘i managers, biologists, and operations specialists. The aircraft made low passes over Mokumanamana, French Frigate Shoals, Laysan Island, and Pearl and Hermes Atoll before landing at Midway Atoll. Although no damage to facilities was apparent, two small islands within French Frigate Shoals appeared to be affected. Round Island may now be smaller, and, true to its name, Disappearing Island has disappeared. Both islands provide vital habitat for Hawaiian monk seals and nesting sea turtles.

The *Oscar Elton Sette* departed Midway Atoll with the Laysan personnel on Saturday and should arrive at Laysan Island today. If the platform tents, power, water-making equipment, and communications are operable, the field crews will remain on the island to continue efforts to restore habitat and monitor seabirds, Hawaiian monk seals, and sea turtles.

The *Sette* will continue on to Tern Island, arriving on Wednesday. An assessment team will conduct a general evaluation of island and test the operability of vital life systems. No personnel will remain on Tern at this time. The *Sette* is scheduled to return to Honolulu on Saturday after the successful completion of its marine debris cruise and its role in this emergency.

“Our interagency team was outstanding in responding to this storm, and we cannot thank the U.S. Coast Guard and *Oscar Elton Sette* crew enough,” White said. “Although we dodged a bullet this time, we had

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17 people who definitely were in extreme danger before they were evacuated. We are most grateful everyone is safe and our facilities appear to be spared.”

Papahānaumokuākea is cooperatively managed to ensure ecological integrity and achieve strong, long-term protection and perpetuation of Northwestern Hawaiian Island ecosystems, Native Hawaiian culture, and heritage resources for current and future generations. Three co-trustees – the Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior, and State of Hawai‘i – joined by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, protect this special place, which is now being considered for inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For more information, please visit www.papahanaumokuakea.gov

Note to Editors: Photographs from the October 24 overflight are available by calling Barbara Maxfield at 792 9531.