

Recovery is Built Through Partnerships

The scope of Sandy's damage reinforced a basic principle of good government: coordination among all affected applicants and agencies to achieve a common goal. Nowhere was this more vividly illustrated than with the Region II New York Sandy Recovery Office's (NYSRO) Environmental and Historic Preservation's (EHP's) collaborative efforts during Sandy's recovery. EHP worked closely with internal staff, federal partners and New York State to streamline the project review process. Their work covered projects that varied in complexity, including projects for more than 100 bridges and a Mesonet, a network of more than 100 automated environmental monitoring stations.

Given its multidisciplinary nature, EHP has a range of responsibilities – further underscoring the need to better inform applicants of the compliance process, manage expectations and to expedite projects. Multiyear statewide agreements were one of the many best practices incorporated into EHP's standard operating procedure post-Sandy. Agreements for historic preservation, coastal zone management and threatened and endangered species were created or initiated, which led to expedited recovery and agreements with New York and will remain in place should another disaster occur.

EHP worked with New York State to expedite review and funding for repairs and upgrades to 106 bridges. Initial EHP assessments found approximately 35 percent of the 106 sites required an environmental assessment review which takes, on average, 120-150 days to complete. An evaluation for EHP compliance is just one part of the review process for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funding. While sharing the findings with the New York State Department of Transportation and the state's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, the HMGP team soon realized that timeframe would leave many parts of the state susceptible to property and bridge damage, temporary bridge closures and would lead to a higher risk of bridge failure.

Region II NYSRO EHP Lead John Dawson said, "While the workload is largely the same as if we had followed a more traditional model, some cost avoidance may be found in some projects due to early identification of potential problems." EHP triaging allowed for a better understanding of what review steps could be done concurrently versus consecutively and, with frontloading, improved project management and expedited review timelines.

To advance the process, HMGP staff worked with EHP to conduct a Programmatic Environmental Assessment, which covers several similar projects by reviewing the environmental and cultural resource impacts of set bounds. In the meantime, EHP performed programmatic consultation reviews with multiple agencies, including New York's State Historic Preservation Office and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and reviewed individual bridges that did not require the PEA. "We took a holistic approach to address issues and solve them quickly and completely," said Region II NYSRO Hazard Mitigation Lead Luis Avila.

The full review and approval process for all 106 sites would typically have been handled as an entire project. The client-driven approach, however, allowed FEMA to obligate individual bridges over time without the need to wait for the entire project to be approved. The end result was faster obligation of FEMA funds. "In previous disasters, the approval and obligation process for a project that involved a single bridge could have taken several years," said Avila.

Within the first 18 months of the grant request, FEMA had obligated funds for approximately 85 percent of the bridges. To date, \$435 million of the total requested amount of \$518 million has been obligated for repairs and mitigation measures for 99 bridges. This is one of the largest and quickest obligations in FEMA's history.

EHP handled the Mesonet project in a similar manner. The State University of New York applied for \$30.5 million in HMGP funding to support the development of 125 surface weather stations. Having this proposed network in place can reduce risks to communities by improving the state's ability to provide better weather-related warnings.

When dealing with potentially severe weather conditions, accurate forecasts are paramount to helping emergency managers plan. To facilitate review of the proposed sites EHP conducted a PEA that allowed for multiple projects to be reviewed for environmental and cultural resource impacts. This streamlined the review process to allow for the production of batched tiered Records of Environmental Consideration (RECs) once the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was signed. EHP conducted programmatic consultation reviews with multiple agencies with the PEA concurrently.

The final site location limited the potential for advancing the project, therefore, EHP engaged in an initial consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for all known and potential tower locations outlining the project and general conservation measures. EHP went a step further and developed a 10-day notification process with the USFWS for sites that required a location change, as long as the new site retained the same or downgraded the determination of effect. This streamlined the process by not having to re-consult, which typically requires a 30 to 60-day timeframe. Frontloading and triaging efforts yielded the improvement in timelines and the 10-day notification process. These are stellar examples of how EHP undertook initiatives to execute National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. By doing so, they were also able to address the cumulative effects of the project as a whole.

To date, 100 sites have been approved for construction. FEMA will obligate the final \$15 million in the near future.

"For both Mesonet and the Bridges, the coordination enabled us to initiate consultation with other agencies and also established a comfort level with managing potential issues," Dawson said.

EHP's commitment to a survivor-centric approach, along with going the extra mile by building and fostering strong relationships with internal and external partners, proves that the foundation to recovery is built through teamwork.

For more information about FEMA's Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation program, please visit: <http://www.fema.gov/office-environmental-planning-and-historic-preservation>.