

Army environmental secretary touts post efficiency efforts

FORT BENNING, Ga. - The Army's assistant secretary for installations, energy and environment put her stamp of approval on Fort Benning's management of the \$3.5 billion in construction and restoration that went into building the Maneuver Center of Excellence while making her first post visit this week.

Katherine Hammack, a founding member of the U.S. Green Building Council, serves as the primary adviser to the Army secretary and chief of staff on all matters related to installation policy and energy security and management. Hammack spent Wednesday and Thursday touring the installation, receiving updates on Fort Benning's various projects and strides toward energy efficiencies.

Compared to other installations, Fort Benning has been a longtime stalwart in curtailing energy use, Hammack said Thursday as she wrapped up her stop with a walk through the National Infantry Museum.

"The energy used per square foot here is among the lowest in the Army, which tells me they've been doing a good job for a long time," she said, adding some lighting retrofits on post were started back in the 1970s and 1980s. "I was impressed with the focus on energy that has been here for a long time."

The secretary got a look at the FlexEnergy methane-processor site on Harmony Church, the Army's only power plant built to convert waste gas into electricity. She also cited the low-speed wind turbine on the air-conditioning unit outside a Warrior Transition Battalion barracks -- installed last summer to turn exhaust into reusable energy -- as another example of how Fort Benning is "piloting new technology."

"They're willing to try other things people haven't tried before, to see if it's good for our Army and our nation," she said. "All the buildings here were built to be very energy efficient to appropriately store the resources we have, because we're all concerned about the availability of electricity and water.

"When we build a building in the appropriate manner, or remodel and retrofit a building in an appropriate manner, it uses less water (and) less energy. And it is appropriate for our future because we want to ensure these buildings are around for the next 50 or 100 years."

Hammack said the MCoE has been an exceptional steward of the environment, too.

As a whole, the Army is responsible for maintaining the habitats of more than 200 endangered species, she said. Fort Benning's most famous might be the red-cockaded woodpecker, which coexists without disruption alongside small-weapons fire and tank maneuvers.

"The installation is doing a great job recognizing that we have a responsibility to the future of these species, and it can be compatible with our mission," she said.

Hammack said the objective for all Army posts is "Net Zero," the program in which installations aim to use as much energy and natural resources as they're able to generate on site. Fort Benning is working to increase its use of alternative energy in an effort to strike an "appropriate balance," she said.

As the U.S. military withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the Department of Defense faces the challenge of shrinking budgets as it attempts to reach its environmental and efficiency goals, the secretary said. The Army has been granted congressional authority to seek out energy-saving performance contracts. She said the private sector can invest in a facility, and installations pay for that investment out of the energy savings it yields.

"They help us identify areas where we can save energy and identify what the cost is to save it and what the return on investment is," she said. "That's how the private sector is helping the Army in an era where we have declining budgets."

Lt. Gen. Michael Ferriter, the former MCoE commander and new commanding general at Installation Management Command, was back at Fort Benning and accompanied Hammack on some stops around the installation.

The general played a role in the planning behind the massive construction and renovation projects on post. He said the modernization expertise, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards, and "green" measures employed by engineers ultimately will lower energy use and costs while pumping savings back into the Army's operational budget.

"As we cut the energy costs, that allows us to put the money into weapons systems, training and Family programs. It's an absolute win-win," he said. "It's a cultural change. We have to teach our leaders and Soldiers to be good at saving energy, and at the same time not lose sight of the fact it's the best Army in the world, and Fort Benning provides the best training in the world."