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176th Wing Public Affairs

Alaska National Guard's aviation task force ready to assist state during COVID-19

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Alaska Army and Air National Guard air crews and aircraft stand ready to assist the state during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Joint Task Force - Aviation, a staff agency of the Guard's Joint Task Force - Alaska, is prepared to accept requests for assistance (RFA) and to task Army and Air units to fulfill those requests.

Alaska Army National Guard Col. Robert Kurtz, JTF-Aviation staff lead, said RFAs would be routed to local community emergency operations centers (EOC). If the request couldn't be fulfilled at the community level, it would then be routed to the Alaska State EOC.

If other state agencies couldn't fulfill the request, they would be sent to the Alaska National Guard Joint Operations Center. If approved, the request would then be routed to JTF-Aviation.

Kurtz said the RFA would be fulfilled using a hub-and-spoke construct, with community hubs serving state regions.

"Joint Task Force - Aviation consists of both Army and Air Guard personnel who are postured to support COVID-19 response and to reinforce five key areas of interest — the Interior, Northwest, Southwest, Central and Southeast Alaska," he said.

Kurtz said there is a robust civilian aviation capability throughout the state, and the task force will not violate the will-not-compete doctrine as it pertains to private carriers and operators.

"We want to make sure we use all of the civilian capabilities to handle this," he said. "We are here for any type of surge or helping in any location that is in dire need of medical supplies, equipment or transport of medical personnel."

Kurtz said the task force is also prepared to support disaster-relief operations in case of floods, forest fires, earthquakes or other natural disasters.

Serving the major hubs would be the "heavy" aircraft, C-17 Globemaster III cargo aircraft and HC-130J Combat King II search-and-rescue aircraft belonging to 176th Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

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KC-135 Stratotanker air-to-air refueling aircraft of the 168th Wing at Eielson Air Force Base can extend the range of other aircraft and also be used to move cargo and personnel.

The HC-130 has short takeoff and landing (STOL) capabilities, Kurtz said, so they can service shorter airfields around the state. The C-17 is also STOL, though it needs longer runways than the Combat King.

Alaska Air National Guard Col. Kenneth Radford, 176th Operations Group commander, said the wing will continue to support their federal missions of strategic air mobility and civil search-and-rescue missions statewide throughout the crisis. He said supporting state and federal Title 10 missions simultaneously is challenging but offers opportunities as well.

“The benefits outweigh the challenges because training in one mission makes you better at the other,” Radford said. “Because we’re flying the Title 10 mission, our pilots have to fly and maintain currency, so we’re getting more practice, and that prepares them for the state mission.”

Alaska Air National Guard Lt. Col. John Romspert, 212th Rescue Squadron director of operations, said pararescue Airmen are additionally equipped with powered air purifier respirator masks, which use positive pressure to actively keep out infectious agents. The added protection is useful for the specialized Airmen who provide medical aid during rescue operations.

The Army National Guard operates C-12F Huron business-class turboprop aircraft that can quickly ferry leaders and critical personnel around the state.

Kurtz said helicopters, which can be staged at the hubs of Bethel, Nome, Juneau, Fairbanks, Anchorage, Prudhoe Bay, and Utqiagvik, to name a few, would be able to ferry passengers and cargo between the hubs and outlying communities.

The Army National Guard’s 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, operates UH-60L Black Hawks and the newly fielded CH-47F Chinooks and UH-72 Lakotas.

Most UH-60s are general-purpose helicopters that can support cargo- and personnel-movement operations as well as casualty-evacuation operations. Specialized UH-60 variants are specially designed to support medical evacuation with in-flight patient care.

The CH-47 is the Army’s heavy-lift helicopter and can carry three times the personnel of a UH-60 or up to 18,000 pounds of fire-extinguishing water.

Crews of the smaller UH-72s can use its electro-optical/infrared sensor for spotting fires and river flooding.

The HH-60G Pave Hawk is a version of the UH-60, which is specially modified for rescue operations and is flown by 176th Wing.

Kurtz said air crew are trained and equipped to operate in environments where viral infection is a concern.

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“You have to carry out every mission with COVID in mind,” he said. “In some respects, flying is the easy part, but it’s difficult when you have to wear protective gear on top of normal military flight gear,” he said. “They’re up to the challenge because they practice wearing chemical-protective equipment while training for their federal mission overseas, and there are some similarities between the two operating environments.”

Whatever airframe they fly, Kurtz said Army and Air Guardsmen are ready to assist.

“They are a group of professional pilots who are always focused on leaning forward and helping Alaskans,” he said. “Their skillset is unmatched, especially when dealing with the environment we fly in here in Alaska.”

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Story link includes story and selected full-resolution photos.

<https://www.176wg.ang.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2170366/alaska-national-guards-aviation-task-force-ready-to-assist-state-during-covid-19/>



Alaska Army and Air National Guard Soldiers and Airmen loaded two 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters onto a 144th Airlift Squadron C-17 Globemaster III Sept. 17, 2018, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The helicopters and crews were bound for the East Coast to assist in Hurricane Florence humanitarian relief efforts. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard /Released)

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Alaska Air National Guard Maj. Daniel Kelley, a combat systems operator with the 211th Rescue Squadron, communicates vital data to the pilots during an aerial damage assessment Nov. 30, 2018, on a HC-130J Combat King II. In a matter of hours, members of the Alaska Air National Guard's Maintenance and Operation groups turned a planned community engagement into an aerial survey of earthquake damage in Southcentral Alaska, reporting findings to the State of Alaska's Joint Operations Center. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. N. Alicia Goldberger /Released)

Mississippi Army National Guard Maj. Richmond Lachney and Staff Sgt. Vernon Wasson, 47th Weapons of Mass Destruction-Civil Support Team, unload equipment from an Alaska Army National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter during ORCA 2019 in Alaska, July 16, 2019. 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation aircrews from the Alaska unit transported CST members to several exercise locations in support of event scenarios. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pvt. Grace Nechanicky/Released)



A five-ship formation of U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II, F-16 Fighting Falcon fighters and a 168th Wing KC-135 Stratotanker flies over the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex April 21, 2020. The KC-135 extended the range of the F-35s, assuring a smooth delivery of the two new stealth aircraft. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Jerilyn Quintanilla)