



COMMANDER, NAVY REGION HAWAII
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE
850 TICONDEROGA STREET, SUITE 110
JBPHH, HAWAII 96860
PHONE: 808-473-2888 FAX: 808-473-2876
www.cnic.navy.mil/hawaii



MEDIA ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

POC: Lydia Robertson, Director of Public Affairs
Cell: (808) 554-4813
Duty Cell: (808) 371-5189

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U.S. Navy Identifies Operator Error as Cause of May 6 Fuel Release at Red Hill

New practices and safety steps already implemented

HONOLULU, HI – A U.S. Navy investigation determined that operator error caused the release of 1,618 gallons of jet fuel (JP-5) from a pipeline inside the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility (RHBFSF) on May 6. The release was not from the fuel tanks. The Navy recovered all but 38 gallons of fuel and has already implemented new procedures, many within days of the incident.

The Navy reviewed inventory records to determine the amount of fuel released and subsequently recovered. The fuel containment system at the RHBFSF performed as it was designed. It properly monitored and detected the fuel release, and collected the majority of the fuel.

In the days following the release, all system operators met to reinforce safety and operational procedures, and safeguard measures have been added, including the requirement for more system operators in the control room during all fuel transfer evolutions.

“I am taking corrective action to improve safety in all aspects of Red Hill operations,” said Capt. Bert Hornyak, commanding officer, Naval Supply Systems Command Fleet Logistics Center (FLC) Pearl Harbor. “Our team showed a quick and professional response to contain most of the release, and we are just as focused on and committed to keeping this from happening again.”

Hornyak’s team has already completed an internal review of personnel training and procedures.

The investigation, conducted by the Naval Petroleum Office of the Naval Supply Systems Command, determined that an operator failed to follow specific procedures to close valves in the fuel lines during fuel transfer operations. This failure caused a pressure surge within the system, which blew out an expansion coupling; fuel was released from the pipeline as a result. There was no damage to the Red Hill underground storage tanks, and all tanks passed follow-on tank tightness tests conducted after the fuel release from the pipeline. Repairs to the impacted section of the pipeline are scheduled to be completed by June 2022.

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There is no impact to operations.

The investigation also identified contributing factors: butterfly valves were used as isolation valves; the set point for the out-of-balance alarm in the Automated Fuel Handling Equipment (AFHE) system was too high to identify the fuel movement; the AFHE equipment failed to indicate a pressure drop in the pipeline; and expansion couplings were used in sections affected by maintenance projects. FLC and Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command are addressing these issues.

The Navy has provided copies of the investigation to the Hawaii Department of Health (DOH) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who regulate the facility. Redacted copies of documents associated with this investigation are posted to the Red Hill website.

The Navy remains committed to environmental stewardship and continues to work closely with federal and state agencies, including the Hawaii DOH and the EPA under an Administrative Order on Consent (AOC), to protect human health, the environment and Oahu's drinking water.

Red Hill provides the Department of Defense ready access to fuel for needed mission readiness. It is part of the nation's critical infrastructure – vital to national security, safety and defense. Red Hill is also a vital fuel source for Hawaii during disasters and emergencies. Red Hill could supply gravity-fed fuel to the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport, Honolulu Harbor, Hawaiian Electric, and responding ships and aircraft. Hawaii's isolation makes us dependent on shipping and air transport. The fuel from Red Hill helps ensure those transit lanes are secure.

For more information about Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, please visit the Navy's website: www.cnic.navy.mil/redhill.

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