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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, May 15, 2012 - New authority in this year's Defense Department authorization act allows the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps reserves to be called to duty in response to natural disasters or emergencies in the homeland, and also to be mobilized for extended periods to support theater security missions around the world.

Except for a crisis involving a weapon of mass destruction, the reserves historically have been prohibited from providing a homeland disaster response, Army Lt. Gen. Jack C. Stultz, the Army Reserve chief, told reporters yesterday.

That job was reserved for the National Guard, which state governors could call up as needed to support civil authorities. If additional forces were required ? as when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005 ? active-duty service members became the federal default force.

That's long been a frustration to Stultz, who saw no sense in bypassing local reserve members simply because they operate under federal "Title 10" authority and not state "Title 32" authority.

"In a lot of cases, there were reserve-component soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who were close at hand with the capabilities needed, but didn't have the authority to act," he said. "Finally, we got the law changed. This new legislation says that now we can use Title 10 reserves."

For these forces to be used, the law specifies that the president must declare an emergency or disaster and a state governor must request the assistance.

Stultz clarified what hasn't changed under the law. Civil authorities will remain the first responders. And when they need military support, National Guard forces will be the first to step

in when called by their state governor. "We are not trying to change any of that," the general said.

But now, when a situation also demands a federal response, reserve forces can step in to assist for up to 120 days.

Army Gen. Charles H. Jacoby Jr., commander of U.S. Northern Command, and his staff are evaluating their federal response plan to take advantage of these new capabilities, Stultz said.

Meanwhile, Stultz participated in a recent U.S. Army North exercise that helped to test the concept. The scenario involved two hurricanes hitting the United States almost simultaneously, requiring a federal response.

The exercise helped participants work through the procedures that would be involved in calling Title 10 forces to duty, Stultz explained. "How does the governor and the adjutant general within a state go through the process of asking for federal help?" he said. "How do Army North and Northcom identify what capabilities are close by that they can use? How do we go through alerting these forces to go down and help this natural disaster? And as always, who cuts the order to put them on duty, and who provides the funding?"

Stultz said he's gratified by almost universal support for the new legislative authority.

"Everybody is on board, from the governors to the adjutants general to Army North to Northcom saying this is going to be a good thing," he said. "We just have to make sure we have the procedures and processes worked out."

And now, before the authority is actually needed, is the time to get that resolved, he said. "Let's not wait until a hurricane hits to say, 'How do we do it?' he said.

Another change in the 2012 authorization act allows Title 10 reservists to be called to duty to

support unnamed overseas contingencies. The reserves, and particularly the Army Reserve, have a long history of deploying members for medical, engineering and other missions to support theater engagement and security cooperation efforts.

Typically, they did so as their annual training, which generally limits their engagements to 21 to 29 days, Stultz said. That could be particularly limiting when the missions are in far-flung parts of the world, he said, sometimes reducing time on the ground to as little as 14 days before the reservist had to pack up and return home.

"With this new authority, now we can send them down for much longer periods of time," Stultz said.

As operations wind down in Afghanistan, Stultz said, he hopes reservists will be more available to support combatant commanders' theater engagement campaigns. Based on the Army force generation model, that means Army Reservists will be ready to deploy one out of every five years. He said the pool of ready reservists could conduct extended theater-support missions.

A hospital unit, for example, could potentially spend three months rather than three weeks supporting a medical mission in Central or South America, Africa or Asia. And at the end of that three-month period, another reserve unit could rotate in to replace them.

This additional capability, Stultz said, would give combatant commanders far more assets to support their engagement strategies across their areas of responsibility, even at a time of dwindling resources.

"It is not going to happen overnight," he conceded. "But over time, as we are sending an engineer unit to do a project in the Philippines, [we] have to sit with the Pacific Command and U.S. Army Pacific and say, 'Next year, instead of 29 days, let's do 60 or 90.'"