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THE WORST KIND OF WORK By Kimberly Phelan

New York's debris removal project is the biggest job workers and officials could never have wished for.

When the hellish horrors of Sept. 11 left an unthinkable mass of rubble on and around the former site of the World Trade Center, it was an OEM unknown to most construction professionals that took charge in picking up the pieces.

New York City's Office of Emergency Management (OEM), established about five years ago, had drilled, practiced and planned often enough to mechanically follow its own emergency procedures during the hours immediately following the catastrophe. The effort was complicated, however, by its own staff's evacuation out of No. 7 World Trade Center and relocation to a secure, undisclosed and makeshift emergency center on Manhattan's west side.

The city's Department of Design and Construction (DDC) was assigned to partner with the OEM to undertake the rescue operation and daunting debris-removal project. DDC's executive deputy commissioner, Michael Burton, was appointed by DDC commissioner Kenneth Holden to be the chief choreographer of the clean-up program.

After "bucket brigades"--crews of 60 or so workers filling joint-compound buckets--delicately blanketed the wreckage for survivors, and engineers made rapid structural assessments of buildings in police-barricaded danger-zones, the next necessity was equipment.

One construction equipment dealer reported that police approached nearby jobsites imploring operators to bring machinery to the scene within hours of the gruesome event. Then a mad scramble for light towers ensued. But ultimately, it was four large construction firms that the OEM and DDC leaned on to handle the unprecedented project.

An emergency procurement policy that bypasses the bidding process enabled the city to select Tulley Construction, AMEC, Bovis Lend Lease LMB and Turner Construction based on their ability to mobilize equipment and personnel immediately, said a city official close to the debris removal site.

The companies' ability to absorb initial costs was essential as well, because work without pay, at least temporarily, came with the bleak territory. Four \$250-million contracts soon followed, and the cleanup is now costing about \$60 million a week. The city anticipates that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will reimburse these clean-up expenses, according to Holden, as quoted in an interview with the *New York Construction News*' editor-in-chief.

On Oct. 5, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani stated in a press conference that 179,192 tons of debris--12,325 truck loads--had been removed from the New York disaster site. That's probably a mere 10% tip of the iceberg. About another million tons are left to go, and that could take anywhere from six to nine to 12 more months, said CED's source at the OEM press room, who asked to be unidentified.

Contractors and their subcontractors continue to work around the clock with roughly 17 cranes and some 85 additional pieces of equipment grabbing, scooping, loading and hauling, endlessly.

"It's both difficult work, physically, but emotionally it's got to be beyond words," said the OEM official. "They're seeing things none of us would have ever thought anyone would see. It's a huge testimony, though, to the strength of the human spirit. [The workers] just want to get it done."

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