

Napa Airport provides staging area for earthquake response

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When the largest quake to hit Northern California since 1989 struck just south of Napa in the early morning of Aug. 24, its epicenter was less than 2 miles from Napa County Airport (APC), but the airfield stayed open and provided a critical staging area for disaster response.

“It was a busy weekend, and the ramp and hangars were full, but we had triple-chocked the aircraft and luckily none moved or sustained damage,” said Mark Willey, CEO of Napa Jet Center, the FBO on the airfield. “Everyone, including our charter flights, was able to fly out on schedule.”

The fuel farm, which is above ground, never lost power, and the FBO offices and the terminal were quickly running off backup generators, he reported to the National Business Aviation Association.

The earthquake shattered the windows in the tower, putting it temporarily out of service, but operations are continuing with radio clearances from nearby Oakland Center.

“It’s just like coming into any uncontrolled general aviation (GA) airport, or coming into this airport at night,” said Willey.

There is already a contractor on-site repairing the tower, and airport authorities have set up a temporary tower on the airfield, which should be operational this week.

“This earthquake actually showed how a GA airport can be much more than a GA airport during a disaster,” said Willey. “The California governor’s Office of Emergency Services flew in on helicopters and set up in our offices and the main terminal. We have a lot of space on this airfield, so PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] has also been using it as a mobile command center for disaster response.”

About three months before the quake, Napa Jet Center, the Napa County Airport manager’s office, Cal Fire and the control tower staff held a tabletop exercise of the FBO’s emergency response plan

“That helps you be prepared, when you’re training and working together on your safety management system,” said Willey.

Operations at the airport the week after the quake were about 50% below normal summer volume, mainly due to visitors postponing trips, but Willey reported that traffic has been picking up recently.

“Within minutes of the quake, at 3:30 a.m., our local first responders were at work,” said Willey. “On Aug. 24 and since, everyone in the business aviation community has reached out to us,

from our neighbors at Sonoma Jet Center to colleagues on the East Coast. That's what this industry is all about."