Aftermath of Historic Flood: Forest Service teams helping in Tbilisi, Georgia

This June, a flash flood swept through a neighborhood of Tbilisi, the capital of the country of Georgia. The event killed 19 people, forced 67 families from their homes, destroyed major road infrastructure, and flooded the city zoo. Most of the animals died and the surviving animals wandered the city’s streets. The flood was partially caused by a massive landslide—about 80 acres in size—and minor landslides throughout the watershed, whose debris contributed to the swell of the normally small Vere River. The Government of Georgia requested all aid efforts be redirected to help deal with the aftermath of this devastating event. With support from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Forest Service was able to dispatch three technical teams to provide critical support.

Ten days after the flood, International Programs sent three Forest Service specialists to Tbilisi. The team consisted of a soil and watershed specialist, a hydrologist, and a civil engineer. Working with counterparts from the Georgian government agencies, the team produced a rapid assessment of the flood and landslides in one week. Most critical was the team’s analysis of the immediate, mid-term, and long-term response actions needed.

During the same timeframe, International Programs mobilized its longstanding partnership with the Memphis Zoo which identified one of their senior zoo planning and wildlife managers to travel to Tbilisi. Working with counterparts at the Tbilisi City Zoo, the Memphis Zoo specialist and US Forest Service staff assessed damages, put in place emergency measures to create homes for remaining animals—especially important before the cold winter months—and advised on the plan for the relocation and rebuilding of the zoo in the future.

Later in the summer, the Georgian government turned to the Forest Service for the agency’s geotechnical engineering expertise to identify options for stabilizing the landslide and reopening roads whose damage severely limited access to both local villagers and Tbilisi commuters. During a very intensive two week period, the USFS geotechnical and civil engineers worked to conduct field work, complete geotechnical analysis, and identify alternatives for re-opening of the roads. Forest Service colleagues back in the U.S.A. volunteered their time to analyze existing LiDAR and field data collected by the in-country team to produce the GIS, AutoCAD, and other products. The time difference allowed the stateside team to send results late in the evening which were received in Tbilisi as the team was waking...
up the next morning. The U.S. Forest Service hopes to continue this productive collaboration as Georgia continues in repair the flood damage.