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Local fire districts appreciate value of using inmate firefighters during major California blazes

By Vera Kochan



Inmate firefighters construct handline and crews from MOFD lay hose to secure the fire line. Photo courtesy MOFD Captain-Paramedic II Jacob Airola

Inmates are trained at the California Correctional Center in Susanville, Calif., to determine their eligibility for Fire Camp. Ben Lomond houses a maximum of 113 inmates, all of whom are minimum custody male felons who do not have any convictions for sex-related offenses, escape, arson, or have high-violence tendencies. This allows for five 17-man fire crews. The remaining inmates perform other duties such as mechanics, kitchen workers, clerks, porters, launderers, and landscapers. There are also camps that house female inmate firefighters, with the first one opening in 1983, thanks to a lawsuit filed by two women who wanted the same opportunities as the men.

Why would an inmate choose the program? Those whose crimes were neither serious or violent must serve out their long sentences in prison facilities that aren't typically equipped or designed for long-term housing. As such, many seek an alternative sentence to alleviate the boredom and monotony of their incarceration.

While at Fire Camp, inmates are housed in an open-dormitory setting that includes a dining hall supervised by correctional staff. The camps are subject to ongoing inspections and must comply with standards set by the State Department of Health Services.

Even though they have volunteered for this type of duty, inmates are paid for their services. At Ben Lomond, camp workers earn \$2.67 per day. Skilled inmates (mechanics, cooks, electricians, plumbers, carpenters or welders) can earn up to \$3.56 per day. Inmate firefighters earn between \$2.90 and \$5.12 per day on regular assignments and \$1 per hour on emergencies.

Besides helping to suppress fires alongside Cal Fire teams by creating breaks in vegetation, and carving out barren soil to deny flames any additional fuel by using chainsaws, shovels and axes, inmate crews also help clear streams, improve trails and levees, and assist in rescues involving floods and landslides. "Large scale incidents require the cooperation and dedication of many agencies," explained Airola. "These agencies range from professional, to volunteer, to CDCR crews. The experience, training and skill set vary, but we come together to complete the incident objectives." CDCR hopes that by developing new skills and disciplines, inmates will learn to become positive contributors to society once they are released.

A 2018 Time Magazine report stated that more than 1,000 inmates have required hospitalization between June 2013 through August 2018. "They are more than four times as likely, per capita, to incur object-induced injuries, such as cuts, bruises, dislocations and fractures compared with professional firefighters working on the same fires." They are also more than eight times as likely to inhale smoke and particulates.

The use of inmate firefighters may seem like a new concept to the public, given that the topic has been in the media more recently thanks to the state's drought resulting in high fire danger conditions and out of control blazes, but in fact, inmates have been called upon to assist with large wildfires since World War II (1940s), when there was a shortage of men.

According to an article by Smithsonian Magazine History Correspondent Francine Uenuma, "The roots of these incarcerated firefighters' story date back more than a century; reliance on prison labor in California is almost as old as the state itself. Soon after the Gold Rush-era population boom and California's entry into the Union in 1850, San Quentin State Prison was built by inmates held on nearby ships. In the early 1900s, inmates in road camps labored to meet the demands created by a growing - and increasingly mobile - population."

"Inmate firefighters have been at every large incident I've ever attended," stated Moraga-Orinda Fire District Captain-Paramedic II Jacob Airola. "We typically do not work directly with them. They are formed up in groups with their supervisors. We rarely interact, but respect the work each other are doing."

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) runs the Conservation Unit Camps also known as Fire Camps. One such camp is located in Ben Lomond near Santa Cruz. Before heading there,

Since 2016, four inmate firefighters have died in the line of duty, including one female. Family members and friends have expressed the fallen firefighters' desires to turn their lives around and become productive members of society as the reason for sticking with the program.

Assembly Bill 2147: Expedited Expungement, was authored by Assembly Majority Leader Eloise Gomez Reyes who said that prisoners were treated as heroes on the fire line, but snubbed as "convicted criminals" shortly after being released from prison, after "basically providing a free service to the residents of California. We need to trust that these inmates were rehabilitated." Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the bill in September 2020, which provides an expedited expungement pathway for formerly incarcerated individuals who have successfully participated in the inmate firefighter program. Many have gone on to work with Cal Fire, the United States Forest Service, and interagency hotshot crews which don't require Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certifications.

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[back](#)

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