

CAMP GABILAN #38 Going Out of Business?

SUMMARY

California Penal Code Section 919 requires each Civil Grand Jury to inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.¹ The Monterey County Civil Grand Jury did not visit Camp Gabilan, a fire camp located in Soledad, but gathered information readily available from government and public media and internet media. The most significant observations were the extent of local services and the declining inmate count. While a decline in a prison population is generally desirable, the declining inmate count at Camp Gabilan has worrisome aspects as well, since a reduction in the population equates to a reduction in the number of firefighting crews that will be available.

BACKGROUND

California State Conservation Camp Program facilities support state, local and even federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural or manmade disasters. According to some reporting, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) fire camps save California an estimated \$80 to \$100 million a year in firefighting costs with this program.² The CDCR, in cooperation with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LAC FIRE), jointly operates 43 conservation camps commonly known as fire camps, located in 27 counties of California. All camps are minimum-security facilities and all camps are staffed with both correctional staff and CAL FIRE staff. The Associate Director of Reception Centers in

¹ <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/penal-code/pen-sect-919.html>

² Ceballos, A. (2015). Monterey County houses but doesn't supply firefighting inmates. Monterey Herald. (updated 9/11/19). At: <https://www.montereyherald.com/2015/08/19/monterey-county-houses-but-doesnt-supply-firefighting-inmates/>

the Division of Adult Institutions of the CDCR is responsible for overseeing the fire camps.

Inmates at the California fire camps receive the same entry-level training that CAL FIRE seasonal firefighters receive. The inmates also continue with ongoing training from CAL FIRE throughout the time they are in the program. Inmate handcrews are a significant unit in CAL FIRE's firefighting "ground attack" resources. Their primary function is to construct fire lines by hand in areas where heavy machinery cannot be used because of steep or rocky terrain, or areas that may be considered environmentally sensitive. An inmate must volunteer for the fire camp program; no one is involuntarily assigned to work in a fire camp. Volunteers must have "minimum custody" status, or the lowest classification for inmates (Level 1 inmates), based on their sustained good behavior in prison, their conforming to rules within the prison, and participation in rehabilitative programming.³ Some conviction offenses automatically disqualify an inmate from participating in the conservation camp assignment program, even if those inmates have minimum custody status. Those convictions include sexual offenses, arson, and any history of escape with force or violence.

Male inmates receive firefighting training at one of four locations: the California Correctional Center in Susanville, the Sierra Conservation Center in Jamestown, the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo, and the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco.⁴ Female inmates who participate in the conservation camp program receive their firefighting training at the California Institution for Women in Corona. After completing their training they can be assigned to one of two female fire camps. Juvenile offenders also can participate. They are trained at the Pine Grove Conservation Camp in Amador, which accommodates youth up to the age of 25. There is one restriction for juvenile offender participants, and that is only those 18 years of age or older can volunteer for firefighting.

³ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/>

⁴ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/>

When not fighting fires, inmate firefighters perform conservation and community service projects such as clearing brush and fallen trees to reduce the chance of fire, maintaining parks, as well as bagging, flood protection and reforestation.⁵

METHODOLOGY

Primary research was conducted by reviewing State Government agency sources. Relevant background was obtained by a review of open source media that focused on County or fire camp issues.

Additional information was gathered in conjunction with the Civil Grand Jury visits to the other prison facilities including: the Monterey County Jail, the Soledad Correctional Training Facility, and the Salinas Valley State Prison.

DISCUSSION

Camp Gabilan #38 is a fire camp located in Soledad, California. Built and opened in January 1986, the camp's primary mission is to provide inmate fire crews for fire suppression missions in the Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz County areas. Although Camp Gabilan is focused primary on this four-county area, the Camp's crews may be dispatched to anywhere in the state. During winter, the camp also responds to emergency floods and landslides. In addition to fire suppression, the camp has a Mobile Kitchen Unit that is activated when there is a state of emergency. This Mobile Kitchen likewise can be deployed in the four counties or state-wide if necessary.⁶



As mentioned above, Camp Gabilan has a joint staff. The CDCR camp staff consists of 11 law enforcement personnel (1 Lieutenant, 2 Sergeants, and 8 Officers). The corresponding CAL-FIRE staff consists of

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/gabilan/>

a fire captain and 14 firefighter staff. The maximum capacity of Camp Gabilan is 132 inmates. Of the 132 inmates, 102 (77%) are authorized as firefighters and serve in six emergency fire crews. Each fire crew has 17 firefighters.⁷ The remaining 30 inmates (23%) constitute staff positions in the camp. The support staff work in the camp only and are not trained to deploy for firefighting.

Camp Gabilan, like all California fire camps, is an integral part of California's firefighting system. The Civil Grand Jury noted numerous media accounts of the Camp Gabilan crews fighting fires in Monterey County and other fires in different parts of the state. During non-emergency periods, when the fire threat is lower, the inmate fire crews provide a workforce for conservation and community service projects in Monterey County. These projects have included:

- In the City of Monterey: Greenbelt fire fuel reduction and habitat restoration including removal of invasive non-native plants, reforestation with native trees and plants, erosion control and greenbelt maintenance.⁸
- At the Marina Dunes: Planting of indigenous flowers, abatement of weeds, and felling dead trees.⁹
- In the Regional State Parks: Felling of dead trees, restoring historical sites, building bridges, clearing hiking trails and taking down footbridges during winter weather.¹⁰
- In the Del Monte Forest area: Fuel reduction on open space lands of Del Monte Forest and Pebble Beach with the principal focus on thinning pine saplings which spouted as a result of the 1987 Morse Fire in the Huckleberry Hill area.¹¹

⁷ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/4938/fireterminology.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/gabilan/>

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

- In the City of Carmel: Flood control and clearing nonindigenous vegetation from waterways.¹²
- In the City of Del Rey Oaks: Cleaning and chipping willows from intersections and waterways.¹³
- Other projects in Monterey County, including firefighting at Federal, State and Regional Parks and at Laguna Seca Raceway.¹⁴

When not deployed fighting fires or involved in community restoration or fire prevention projects, inmates of Camp Gabilan can participate in “in-camp” projects. The CAL FIRE in-camp projects include vehicle maintenance/repairs, small engine repairs, and even fire hose repair shops. This camp, like other fire camps around the state, also has prisoner support activities such as a hobby program, prison fellowship, saw classes, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Celebrate Recovery, and music programs. With all the skills and crafts that inmates can learn during their incarceration in the fire camps, they can become qualified to apply for a job with CAL FIRE or the U.S. Forest Service upon their release.¹⁵

Statistical context

As noted in preceding sections, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) responds to all types of emergencies. Significant emergencies are categorized as “incidents” and may include large, extended-day wildfires (10 acres or greater), floods, earthquakes, hazardous material spills, or similar situations.¹⁶ Forest fires represent the bulk of CAL FIRE responses and a snapshot of two years’ forest fire responses is presented in Table 1 (state wide) and Table 2 (Monterey County only).

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/4938/fireterminology.pdf>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/>

Table 1 California Forest Fire Activity				
Year	Acres Burned	Incidents (named fires)	Fatalities	Structures Damaged / Destroyed
2017 ¹⁷	1,548,429	9,270	47	10,280
2018 ¹⁸	1,963,101	7,639	100	24,226

Table 2 Monterey County Forest Fire Activity				
Year	Acres Burned	Incidents (named fires)	Fatalities	Structures Damaged / Destroyed
2017 ¹⁹	2,562	15	Unknown	Unknown
2018 ²⁰	5,950	11	Unknown	Unknown

CDCR firefighter - declining numbers

On November 14, 2019, the CDCR website reported that there were approximately 3,700 inmates working at fire camps with about 2,600 (70%) of them fire-line qualified. Less than three months later, on February 10, 2020, the CDCR website updated its website to show a reduction in that force to approximately 3,100 inmates working at fire camps with about 2,200 (71%) of them fire-line qualified.²¹ This was a decline of 600 inmates over a three month period and it was not an outlier phenomenon. At least part of this decline in inmates can be attributed to the long-term trend that developed from the California law that sought to reduce prison overcrowding, California AB 109.²²

¹⁷ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2017/>

¹⁸ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2018/>

¹⁹ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2017/> (search by county)

²⁰ <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2018/> (search by county)

²¹ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/>

²² https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201120120AB109

The Civil Grand Jury noted some reporting which identified the impact of this bill on California's fire camps as far back as 2016. Increasingly there are fewer inmates to fill the fire camp program.²³ This is also an issue for the four local county areas supported by Camp Gabilan. For example, the Civil Grand Jury noted that on April 3, 2019, there were only a total of 93 inmates assigned to Camp Gabilan. This meant the fire camp was down to 70% of its capacity (132). However, just eight months later (January 2, 2020) the on-hand number of inmates for Camp Gabilan had plunged further to 69 inmates, or 52% of its capacity (132).²⁴ Even if fire crews were reduced in number to 14 inmate firefighters per crew, a number which has been noted in recent years' media reporting for some fire camps, this would mean that Camp Gabilan could only field approximately three reduced-sized crews in response to a fire incident. A similar, smaller number of inmates, serving in support staff roles, would still remain in the camp and continue to provide support functions.

The Civil Grand Jury noted that the state has been seeking to mitigate this trend with renewed Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) facilities, expanded in their firefighting role.²⁵ However, the Civil Grand Jury could not identify a comparable number of CCC facilities or crews to currently substitute for the Camp Gabilan fire camp in our county. Moreover, other programs are unlikely to provide the same level of economic savings while sustaining our environment.²⁶ Finally, the Civil Grand Jury noted the importance of rehabilitation, restoration, and local community service that is also reduced as the fire camp numbers dwindle and more Level 1 inmates are retained at county prison facilities.

²³ Thompson, D. (2016 September 18) California Turns to Civilians as Inmate Firefighters Dwindle. *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO). p.A7.

²⁴ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/gabilan/>

²⁵ Thompson, 2016

²⁶ Rogers, D. (2009, Sep-Oct). California's Inmate Firefighting Crews: Providing a Valuable Service. *Corrections Forum*. 18:5. Retrieved from Questia.

Findings

- F1. The California State Conservation Camp Program fire camps provide a significant service to California communities, to the local environment, and to the inmates who participate in that program.
- F2. Camp Gabilan's ability to support local fire incidents has been reduced without sufficient substitute in Monterey County.
- F3. Camp Gabilan's ability to provide local ecological conservation projects has been reduced by the reduction in Camp Gabilan's operating capacity.

Photo Credit.

Page 3. Untitled.

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Date: Tuesday May 1, 2012.

Source: CAL FIRE Inyo-Mono-San Bernardino Unit Blog (discontinued)

At: <http://calfirebdu.blogspot.com/2012/05/fire-crews-participate-in-annual.html?m=1>

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.
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