



CAL FIRE Conservation Camp Program

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) is currently authorized to operate 39 Conservation Camps statewide that house more than 4,300 inmates and wards. These camps are operated in conjunction with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the Division of

Juvenile Justice. Through these cooperative efforts CAL FIRE is authorized to operate 196 fire crews year-round. These crews, also referred to as hand crews, are available to respond to all types of emergencies including wildfires, floods, search and rescue. Fire crews perform more than 2.5 million hours of emergency response work each year.



The crews are completely mobile throughout the state and are strategically located in areas that are most likely to need their assistance. They are carefully screened by custodial agencies for their suitability for the program, including physical, emotional, and intellectual aptitudes, as well as a lack of arson in their records. Potential crew members are evaluated again during physical fitness training by the custodial agency and yet again during their basic training by CAL FIRE. Fire Crew Firefighter Basic Training consists of a week of classroom training and a week of field training and covers wildland fire safety and attack, hand tool use, teamwork, and crew expectations. Once assigned to a fire crew, a minimum of four hours-per-week of advanced training is provided to each fire crew firefighter, with some members progressing to more responsible positions on the crew. All CAL FIRE fire crews are tested each spring during rigorous Fire Crew Preparedness Exercises.



On fires, building “freeways” with chain saws and hand tools through whatever vegetation happens to be in the line of fire is normal crew routine. However, direct attack, where the crew’s efforts are applied directly to the flaming front of a fire, is the tactic of choice when the distance between the wildfire, and life and property grows smaller. You will also see these crews set up ahead of a fire to protect structures.

CAL FIRE fire crews are available year-round; consequently, they have become California’s storm troopers. All of California’s major disasters over the last few years have seen the assistance of the fire crews in a labor intensive effort to contain and mitigate the situation, such as the fires, floods, heavy snows, search and rescue operations, earthquakes and floods.

When not assigned to emergency response or prefire project work, crews conduct labor-intensive project work on public lands. These fire crews conduct critical hazard fuels reduction projects in support the state and federal fire plans. Additionally, fire crew projects include repair and maintenance of levies for flood prevention; maintenance of local, state, and federal park infrastructures; clearing debris from streams; removing roadside litter; constructing hiking trails; and providing many other important community services.

A typical conservation camp will be located within a few miles of a small population center. It will have a civil service staff of at least 24 employees, between CAL FIRE and the cooperating agency, and will field five fire crews. The budget for a typical camp, including both agencies’ payroll and operating costs, is about \$2.35 million. Many of the goods and services required for operation of the conservation camp will be purchased from local vendors, and it is common for staff to be active, involved members of the local community.

