

A LOT MORE THAN FIREFIGHTERS

A Report on Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Conservation Camps

June 17, 2008

Summary

Located on Highway 20 in Jackson State Demonstration Forest, between Willits and Fort Bragg, Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Conservation Camps (the Camps), provide a useful way for prison inmates to contribute to society. These inmates are low security risks. They are sent to the camps by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) facility in Susanville. Training for firefighting begins in Susanville and is a continuous process once the inmate reaches Camp. The primary mission of the Camps is to provide crews for fire suppression in Mendocino County and throughout the state.

When the inmate crews are not fighting fires, they are the hand crews for floods, conservation projects and rescues. They also provide community services for local, state and federal agencies.

Secondary goals of the Camps are to serve the community. Contributions have been dramatic in numerous communities. They include money for the Make-A-Wish Foundation and donations of wood furniture and cabinetry to non-profit organizations. Labor has been provided to upgrade playgrounds in schools and public parks, and to replace roofing at a community site. Vegetation has been cleared on community water district properties and other places. These opportunities promote a solid work ethic for the inmates.

The Camp supervisors consider reducing recidivism an important goal. Learning and improving job skills are positive steps toward this goal. There are self-help groups and educational opportunities, available by correspondence, at the camps. In exchange for their contribution, inmates may reduce the length of their incarceration.

Methods

The Grand Jury visited Chamberlain Creek on May 27 and Parlin Fork on June 3, 2008. Jurors interviewed CDCR and Cal Fire supervisors and staff, and reviewed documents.

Background

California Penal Code §919(b) states that “...*The Grand Jury shall inquire into the conditions and management of the public prisons within the county.*”

Findings at Both Camps

1. There are Memorandums of Understanding for mutual aid responses with several agencies, including Cal Fire, California Highway Patrol, Mendocino County Sheriff's Department and Park Rangers.
2. Inmates are a low security risk and most are incarcerated directly or indirectly because of alcohol offenses or other drug use, abuse or sales.
3. Inmates who have committed arson, sexual, or serious violent crimes are not sent to fire camps.
4. All mail is read, both incoming and outgoing, and all telephone calls are taped. Attorney-client privileged communications are the exception.
5. Visiting hours are on the weekend. Visiting at these camps is less frequent because of the remote locations.
6. An inmate could spend up to five years in the Camp, although nine months is the average.
7. Misbehavior by an inmate is documented in their file. For serious offenses, an inmate may be returned to the facility at Susanville, which then may refer him to another State facility. There is an appeal process for inmates who disagree with the decision of the hearing officers.
8. There is zero tolerance for gang symbols.
9. Seriously sick or injured inmates are returned to Susanville, where medical facilities are available. An inmate will return to Camp upon medical release. Minor injuries or illness are treated at local medical facilities.
10. The Camps have no separate budget; they are part of the State of California, CDCR's budget. There are specific allotments for clothing and food for each inmate.
11. The budgeted amount of money for three meals for each inmate is \$2.55-\$2.65 per day and has not increased in nearly 20 years.
12. Inmates earn a minimum of \$1.45 up to \$3.90 per day, depending on their skill level. If they are firefighting, they receive \$1 per hour from portal to portal. The State of California is self-insured for Workers' Compensation.
13. Inmate turnover makes fire fighting training especially difficult. The turnover rate is estimated to be about 50 inmates per year.
14. Inmates who are qualified, receive a physical, and are pre-trained at the California Correctional Center at the Susanville facility, before arriving at the Camps.
15. There are five crews consisting of up to 17 inmates at each site.
16. While fighting fires, inmates wear protective gear and carry 25+ pound packs with equipment, food and water.
17. The sites are fully integrated with Cal Fire.
18. The Emergency Crew Transport is fully equipped with fire fighting equipment. When inmates arrive at a fire, a Cal Fire captain takes charge.
19. A correctional officer usually accompanies the fire fighter crew. At the site of the fire, the Cal Fire captain is in command, and the correctional officer might not leave the staging area.

20. Cal Fire provides a mobile kitchen vehicle which serves meals to inmates on the fire line. This unit allows preparation of 500 meals a day.
21. Inmates, when off-site, are counted regularly by the Cal Fire captain.
22. All officers have earned Peace Officer Standards and Training Certification (POST); no weapons are permitted on site.
23. The correctional officers work eight-hour shifts.
24. Inmates are housed comfortably in barracks style buildings.
25. There are out of bounds signs, but no fences at the Camps.
26. A poorly equipped weight room is not conducive to the physical conditioning that is an important part of being a firefighter.
27. There are library books, a recreation room, a hobby area, and outdoor recreation facilities. The County Bookmobile comes every other week.
28. The kitchens appeared clean and sanitary. The kitchen workers begin early in the morning to prepare baked goods and cook all food from scratch.
29. The inmates have recently expanded the vegetable garden areas. There is a greenhouse so seedlings may be planted earlier. The gardens help stretch the food budget. A correctional staff member with expertise in gardening supervises the garden operations.
30. Assigned work areas include the cabinet/wood furniture shop, laundry, and the barber shop. The sewing room, saw shops, and tool room allow maintenance and repair of firefighting equipment, such as straps, chainsaws, shovels, and hoses.
31. Fifty percent of waste material is mandated to be recycled.
32. The Camps must abide by all government rules and receive inspections from various agencies, the same as private businesses. Walls are posted with Material Safety Data Sheets, as well as other mandated posters. Drivers must fill out the "Drivers Daily Log", the same as ordinary businesses.
33. Cal Fire and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation send two auditors every other year to audit finances and operations at each facility.

Chamberlain Creek

34. The staff consists of one lieutenant, one sergeant, and eight correctional officers.
35. Cal Fire employees comprise one division chief, 10 captains, of which one is an administrative officer, and one certified water treatment operator.
36. The upholstery on the furniture in the TV/Day room was sorely in need of repair.
37. Self-help peer groups hold evening meetings to support inmates who are recovering from alcohol and drug abuse.
38. At the time of the Jurors' visit, four crews were working on the Summit Fire near Santa Cruz.
39. Chamberlain Creek has its own water treatment plant and two sources of water.
40. Chamberlain Creek's kitchen crew cooks and serves a community Thanksgiving dinner at the Harrah Senior Center in Willits every year.

Parlin Fork

41. The Camp is fully staffed, with one lieutenant, who is the camp commander, one sergeant, who is the assistant camp commander and eight correctional officers.
42. Cal Fire operates from this facility with one division chief, 10 captains, one of which is an administrative officer, one mechanic, and one certified water treatment operator.
43. The Camp has a mill, which is temporarily closed due to the retirement of the Cal Fire captain who oversaw the work. The lumber is sold at cost (no labor) to State and local agencies.
44. Parlin Fork has a bus barn, where extensive repairs are made to CDCR and Cal Fire equipment and vehicles.
45. Parlin Fork has its own water treatment plant.
46. Counseling services provided to inmates include Alcoholics Anonymous from Santa Rosa, Narcotics Anonymous, and various church groups.
47. Other facilities include a day room with TV, a pool table, a hobby shop, and a minimally equipped exercise room. Books and other reading materials are available.
48. Parlin Fork benefits the community by restoring lost and found items (such as painting and repairing bicycles). The item is then returned and will be sold by a community group for the benefit of the community.
49. Education is encouraged; coursework for the General Education Diploma (GED) is available on site, and the test is administered at Howard Forest Fire Station. There are correspondence college courses available from Lassen Community College in Lassen County. Several inmates have earned a water treatment license from California State University at Sacramento.
50. Inmates may be transported to the Department of Motor Vehicles in Fort Bragg, where they can obtain a drivers license or identification card in anticipation of their release.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the budget allocation for inmates' food be increased; (Finding 11)
2. exercise rooms be adequately equipped to support levels of fitness required for firefighting. (Finding 26)

Comments

These two conservation camps appear to be well managed with dedicated staff. The facilities' staff is to be commended for maintenance of the facilities and providing positive models for the inmates.

To maintain a high degree of firefighting efficiency, the inmates need quality food and state of the art exercise equipment. The vegetable garden is vital to meeting the daily dietary needs of the inmates, and has provided valuable work experience, including the construction and maintenance of the greenhouse and garden areas.

The inmates have the opportunity to improve their skills, while performing valuable services to Mendocino County. In addition, inmate training and educational programs may assist in reducing recidivism.

We are most fortunate to have these Camps in this area. The inmates are well-trained and capable of being emergency "First Responders."

Required Responses

None

Requested Responses

Commander, Parlin Fork Conservation Camp; (Findings 1-40; All Recommendations)

Commander, Chamberlain Creek Conservation Camp; (Findings 1-33, 41-50; All Recommendations)

Director, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (Findings 11, 26; All Recommendations)

The Grand Jury Report Process

The role of the Mendocino County Civil Grand Jury is to oversee and shed light on local and County government. Jurors conduct oversight inquiries and investigate matters of public interest. Any individual can file a complaint with the Grand Jury using forms available online at www.co.mendocino.ca.us/grandjury.

A Grand Jury inquiry begins when a topic is approved by a minimum of 12 of the 19 seated Jurors. A committee then undertakes extensive research and drafts the report.

Findings are verified against documents and interview notes and are reviewed for accuracy with key individuals in the agency of interest. The draft is then reviewed by an internal Edit committee and must receive approval by the Full Panel. It is then sent to County Counsel and to the Presiding Judge for final review before public release.

Members of the 2007/2008 Grand Jury

Bob Coppock
Brad Hunter
Kathy Johnson
Nancy Kleiber
Lois Lockart
Chas Moser
George Pacheco
Lillian Pacini
Carolyn Pavlovic
Barbara Reed
Wendy Roberts
James Schweig
Dennis Scoles
Bill Stambaugh
Sherry Stambaugh
Finley Williams

Partial Year

Thomas Clay, Al Pierce, Brent Rusert, Pamela Shilling, Thelma Thompson



The cover photo for this report was taken at Point Cabrillo Light Station Historic Park by Donald F. Roberts. This report was produced with the generous assistance of Tony and Maureen Eppstein. Information on Point Cabrillo State Historic Park and the Lighthouse Inn is available at www.pointcabrillo.org