

## **Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Conservation Camps**

Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Conservation Camps are highly functional, well-organized facilities that provide beneficial programs for the County and State. The inmates must maintain a level of physical fitness necessary for strenuous fire fighting and emergency services.

### **Method of Investigation**

The Grand Jury visited Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork facilities, interviewed California Department of Corrections (CDC) Officers, California Department of Forestry (CDF) Officials, on site instructors, and made contact with inmates. The Grand Jury reviewed CDC and CDF publications and web sites. The Grand Jury reviewed publications on the benefits of correct weight training. The Grand Jury reviewed newspaper articles and letters of commendation regarding community services projects.

### **Background**

Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork are two of 38 conservation camps in California that are operated by the CDC and the CDF, housing a combined total of 212 minimum-security inmates. The inmates provide emergency fire fighting, flood control, forest and park maintenance, rescue work, and community services projects.

Assignment to a conservation camp is a hard-won privilege. Inmates are screened carefully using a sophisticated system to identify and weigh personal aspects of their background to determine a potential for camp placement. To qualify they must be minimum security risks, physically fit, and have no history of violent crimes. After being accepted for camp, inmates undergo a vigorous two-week physical fitness training program and they are trained in fire safety and suppression techniques. During the training, they are also evaluated for overall suitability to continue the program. The average sentence in the camps is one year. Inmates who are screened out are sent back to State prison.

Each fire crew has 17 inmates supervised by a CDF Captain and a CDC Correctional Officer. Inmates work 12-hour shifts, often under extreme conditions and in steep terrain, hauling 30 pounds of materials. A trained inmate earns \$1 per hour while fighting fires.

Grand Jury oversight of prisons in Mendocino County is a Grand Jury responsibility per California Penal Code §919.

## Findings

1. **Inmates have contributed to the community through volunteer work that includes preparing food for those in need, donating handmade woodwork items to charity organizations, and speaking to high school students about the dangers of drinking and driving.**

**Response (California Department of Corrections):** *No legal response received by deadline.*

**Response (California Department of Forestry):** *No legal response received by deadline.*

2. **The Conservation Camps stress racial harmony, carefully integrating work crews, recreation teams, and living arrangements in order to combat ethnic tensions. According to a CDC Correctional Officer, this results in a dramatic difference between the attitude of inmates at the camps and those in the prison systems.**
3. **Firefighting crews can be mobilized quickly during emergencies.**
4. **A proper level of physical fitness must be maintained in order to be prepared for the strenuous working conditions encountered when responding to emergencies. Firefighters often haul heavy equipment while clad in suffocating, insulated clothing and then they are required to perform at full capacity enduring high heat and oxygen deficient environments.**
5. **Weight training equipment has been eliminated by Corrections mandate for all prisons statewide, regardless of the type of facility. Penal Code §5010 governs access to Weights and Weight Lifting Equipment.**

## Comment

Penal Code §5010(a) states: “The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the predominant purpose of exercise in correctional facilities should be for the maintenance of the general health and welfare of inmates and that exercise equipment and programs in correctional facilities should be consistent with this purpose. The Legislature further finds and declares that in some cases it may be beneficial to provide access to weights for therapeutic or rehabilitative reasons under a doctor’s order or **for certain vocational activities such as firefighting.**” [Emphasis added]

Subsection (b) of §5010 directs that weight equipment be removed or restricted when safety is a concern. Subsection (c) directs CDC officials to establish regulations governing access to weight equipment. It is clear that CDC chose to remove weight equipment from all correctional facilities rather than implement regulations for weight equipment access.

Because conservation camp inmates are minimum risk, stable, non-violent offenders, the CDC should reconsider the beneficial vocational aspects of a weight training program for inmates in conservation camps.

### **Response Requested**

California Department of Corrections  
California Department of Forestry

### **Response (California Correctional Center)**

We are in receipt of your Grand Jury Report dated June 14, 2001, involving Chamberlain Creek Conservation Camp (CC #17) and Parlin Fork Conservation Camp (CC #6). I agree with your assessment, and am pleased the Mendocino County Grand Jury members found that two of our camps in Mendocino County were “highly functional, well-organized facilities, providing beneficial programs for the County and State.” We strive to place qualified staff in positions that can accomplish that mission, as well as provide the inmates a chance to develop vocational skills and a sound work ethic, which will; hopefully, help them become more productive citizens when released back to society.

The comment concerning use of weights by inmates at conservation camps is certainly valid and deserving of further clarification. Our institution, and all others in the State of California, were directed in a memorandum dated January 29, 1998, by David Tristan, Deputy Director, Institutions Division, that all weightlifting equipment would be removed from all institutions/facilities operated by the California Department of Corrections. It was noted, “no exemptions to this policy have been granted. This includes the camps, minimum support facilities, ranches firehouses, etc.” This mandate was a direct result of Administrative Bulletin 98/01, dated January 2, 1998, signed by Gregory W. Harding, Chief Deputy Director, Support Services, in response to new legislation outlined in Penal Code (PC) Section 5010. PC 5010 goes on to mention numerous valid reasons why the Department took the position to remove weights from all facilities.

The California Department of Corrections (CDC) is also in agreement with the Grand Jury report, which notes that inmates need to maintain a proper level of physical fitness in order to be prepared for the strenuous working conditions encountered when responding to emergencies. Therefore, CDC has a rigorous physical fitness program in place for inmates preparing to go to a conservation camp. When inmates arrive at camp, they are provided an exercise room equipped with pull-up bars, dip bars, abdominal boards, incline benches, etc. There are also hiking trails and a quarter-mile track for running. Further aerobic conditioning can be experienced by use of the basketball court, tennis, baseball field, and handball areas. Additionally, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Fire Captains continually train their crews physically and mentally to be prepared for any type of emergency. Physical conditioning is an extremely important factor of

our inmate firefighting force; however, since the removal of the weightlifting equipment, we have found no correlating drop in the inmates' ability to complete the essential functions of firefighting. Also of note is the significant reduction of physical injuries associated with weightlifting equipment.

It is the intent of this Administration to obey the law and live up to the wishes of the voting public, while keeping our inmates physically fit, healthy, productive, and ready to perform the demanding task of wildland firefighting.

I hop this information is helpful in understanding the Department's position on weightlifting for inmates in camp, and I would like to thank you for your support of Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Camps.

Sincerely,

R.A. Castro, Warden