

Inmate crews return to reduce Central Oregon fire hazards

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

In late May, Oregon Department of Corrections minimum-security inmate work crews will begin a ninth year working with the United States Forest Service to restore forest health and reduce fire hazards in Central Oregon. The 110 inmates assigned to the award-winning Deschutes Conservation Camp will be supervised by correctional officers and receive technical direction from Forest Service employees. The 11-man crews typically work six days a week and live in tents in a remote forest location. By having inmates live and work on the forest rather than traveling from Salem or Lakeview prisons is more efficient in terms of time and production. Corrections officials select inmates based on a number of criteria. For example, inmates must have fewer than three years remaining on their prison terms and have demonstrated good behavior while incarcerated. Convicted sex offenders and arsonists are barred from the program. "Last year, we invited the program back for a fall session because of the inmates' success in hand-piling brush and woody debris in the forest," said Deschutes National Forest Supervisor Leslie Weldon. "The inmates worked on fuels treatment with a focus on protecting homes and recreation sites throughout the forest. In addition, she said the inmates learned critical skills that will help them obtain employment in landscaping, nursery and forestry fields upon release. Deschutes Conservation Camp inmates will complete a 9-week training program and receive key firefighting training that documents their skills. They can use the documentation to seek employment with firefighting crews following their release. This summer's program will focus on protecting homes adjacent to forested land and creating wildland fire defensible space around many communities including Sisters, Camp Sherman, Crescent and La Pine. The inmates will also complete projects that reduce fire threats to the Bend watershed and critical threatened and endangered species habitat. "This partnership is a great example of the DOC's Oregon Accountability Model at work," said DOC Captain Jeff Forbes, camp commander. "It is gratifying to watch the growth of the inmates while they participate in such a worthwhile program." The Oregon Accountability Model is both a philosophy and an action plan embraced by the DOC to hold inmates accountable for their actions and reduce the risk they will continue criminal behavior, both while incarcerated and following release. "Together with the Forest Service and local communities, we have created a national model in Central Oregon," said Corrections Director Max Williams. "This project supports the state's goal of teaching inmates valuable work skills." The partnership program received two federal awards. In 2001, it received the Forest Service's Caring for the Land Award for the Oregon and Washington region. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman also presented an award to DOC officials in July 2002 for their significant work in critical habitat restoration areas of Central Oregon.

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