

CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CAMP WASHINGTON RIDGE

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

California Penal Code Section 919(b) requires “The grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.” The Nevada County Grand Jury defines public prisons as any adult or juvenile correction or detention facility within the county. The Conservation Camp at Washington Ridge is an adult facility within the county of Nevada.

BACKGROUND

California Conservation Camps are operated under a Joint Agency Agreement (JAA) between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDC) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF). CDC is responsible for the custody, supervision, and treatment of inmates. CDF plans and supervises work projects performed by the inmates. Inmate camp crews, each led by a CDF captain, provide a variety of conservation services to state and local government agencies. These camps are strategically located in areas most likely to need their assistance.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury inspected Washington Ridge Conservation Camp #44 on October 26, 2006. The Camp is located east of Nevada City, off Highway 20 and has been an adult facility since June 1, 2005. The Grand Jury interviewed the Camp Commander and Assistant Chief for CDF who are responsible for the operation and oversight of the facility.

FINDINGS

Washington Ridge Conservation Camp has a population of 100 inmates, ten CDC officers, and fourteen CDF officers, including ten Captains who oversee each of the hand crews. Under the JAA, the CDC is responsible for the selection, security, supervision, health, welfare, and discipline of the inmates. CDC staff accompany the inmate crews at all times to provide additional security and care of inmates. The JAA requires the CDF to maintain the camps, provide additional supervision of inmate fire crews and be responsible for the custody and safety of each inmate while on assignment.

The inmates are selected and trained at the California Correctional Center at Susanville. Inmates are carefully screened by custodial agencies for their suitability for participation at a conservation camp. Inmates must pass physical, emotional, and intellectual aptitudes. Potential crew members are evaluated again during physical fitness training by the custodial agency and yet again during their basic training by CDF. 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 CDF fire crews are tested each spring during rigorous Fire Crew Preparedness Exercises. In order to be accepted for camp placement, inmates cannot have a history of escapes, arson, sex-related offenses, or have a high potential for violence. The majority of inmates are serving time for alcohol, drug-related, or property offenses.

During their stay in camp each inmate is given additional job training. The majority of inmates are laborers who receive \$1.45 per day. Skilled inmates can earn up to \$3.95 per day. These skilled positions include, but are not limited to, cooks, mechanics, plumbers, welders, carpenters, landscapers, clerks and electricians. While assigned to fighting fires, inmates earn an additional \$1.00 per hour. The job training also contributes to the maintenance of the camp. Because of the age of the facility, it requires constant maintenance. The inmate workforce allows for upkeep even during periods of fiscal limitations.

The primary mission of the camp is to provide fire crews for fire suppression in the Nevada, Yuba and Placer counties area. Fire crews are mobile throughout California and into limited areas of Nevada. In addition to fire suppression, crews provide a work force for flood control, forest and watershed management, eradication of non-native vegetation, soil conservation, and community improvement projects.

CONCLUSION

Unlike some other prison programs, the camp programs provide significant benefits to the inmates and to the taxpayers of California. The Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is well-run. Dormitories, kitchen, and washrooms are clean and well maintained. The grounds were beautifully maintained and resembled a park-like setting. Staff is professional and believes in the programs they implement. The Grand Jury commends the CDC and the CDF for their success in the operation of Washington Ridge Conservation Camp #44, located in Nevada County.

RESPONSES

None required