

WASHINGTON RIDGE CONSERVATION CAMP



SUMMARY

California Penal Code section 919(b) requires the Nevada County Grand Jury to inquire annually into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county. Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is a public prison located in Nevada County.

A critical part of any such inquiry involves a physical inspection of each facility. It is also based on observation and interviews with management staff, correction officers, inmates, and review of documentation.

Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is located approximately ten miles east of Nevada City. Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is operated in joint agreement with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. This facility provides Nevada County and neighboring counties with tens of thousands of hours of community service annually, including fire prevention/suppression and ground maintenance. Last year, fire suppression accomplished by the Washington Ridge Conservation Camp inmates saved the state an estimated \$80 million.

The cost of housing inmates at Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is substantially lower than inmate housing costs incurred by Nevada County at county-operated holding facilities. Currently, the recidivism rate for inmates housed at this conservation camp is less than one-tenth of one percent.

GLOSSARY

Grand Jury - Nevada County Grand Jury

Fire Camp – Washington Ridge Conservation Camp

CDCR - California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

CAL FIRE - California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

BACKGROUND

California Penal Code section 919(b) requires the Nevada County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to inquire annually into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury inspected the Fire Camp. This inspection included a tour of the facility, interviews, and a review of documents.

Interviews conducted:

- California Department Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Division Chief
- Correctional Peace Officers
- Two inmates

Documents reviewed:

- Reports from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)
- Board of State and Community Corrections Inspection Report
- California Public Safety Realignment Act, commonly known as AB109

DISCUSSION

On November 13, 2014, the Grand Jury conducted an on-site inquiry into the condition and management of the Fire Camp.

On June 1, 2005, the CDCR took possession of the Fire Camp. The Fire Camp was in need of refurbishing and required extensive reconstruction to comply with the environmental statutes and laws required for occupancy.

The Fire Camp is staffed with seven correctional peace officers, one sergeant, and one lieutenant, serving as the camp commander. The CAL FIRE staff of 15, includes a Division Chief, an Office Technician, 11 Fire Captains, and a Waste Water Technical Specialist.

Inmates committed to CDCR are selected and trained at the California Correctional Center in Susanville, California to determine their eligibility for Fire Camp. Once training is completed, eligible inmates are transported to the Fire Camp.

The Fire Camp houses a maximum of 106 inmates, all of whom are minimum custody male-felon convicts. This population allows for five fire crews with up to 17 inmates per crew. The remaining inmates are employed as kitchen workers, porters, landscapers, launderers, clerks, mechanics, maintenance, and other support activity workers. In order to be eligible for Fire Camp, inmates cannot have any convictions for sex-related offenses, arson, escape, or show high violence potential. Most of the inmates are serving time for convictions of alcohol offenses, drug offenses, or property crimes.

The CDCR is responsible for the selection, supervision, care, and discipline of the inmates. CAL FIRE maintains the Fire Camp, supervises the work of the inmate fire crews, and is responsible for inmate custody while on daily projects. CDCR staff often accompanies inmate fire crews on out-of-county assignments or on local assignments located near residential areas. Inmates are directly supervised 24 hours per day while on work projects and while assigned to emergencies.

The Fire Camp inmates provide Nevada County and neighboring counties with tens of thousands of hours of community service annually. The inmate fire crews suppress fire fuels, clear streams, improve trails and levees. They assist in rescues, floods, and landslides. They are an ongoing and consistently available resource to help local authorities. The Fire Camp is succeeding in its mission of improving the safety and quality of life for all state residents, while at the same time providing inmates an opportunity in which to develop skills and discipline needed to become successful contributors to society. During this past year, fire suppression by these inmates saved the state an estimated \$80 million.

Inmates are paid for their work. Most inmates in camp earn \$1.45 per day. Skilled inmates, such as mechanics, clerks, cooks, plumbers, welders, carpenters and electricians, may earn up to \$2.56 per day. Inmate firefighters earn an additional \$1 per day on regular assignments or \$1 per hour on emergency assignments. This income can be used to purchase items from the Fire Camp canteen, such as toiletries, snacks, and correspondence materials. Any unspent savings is critical when inmates are released. Because the first six months are crucial to a new parolee's success, this means of support may contribute to the low recidivism rates. Currently, the recidivism rate for Fire Camp inmates is less than one-tenth of one percent.

Inmates are housed in an open-dormitory setting, with a dining hall staffed by inmates and supervised by CDCR correctional staff. CDCR supervision is provided 24 hours daily. All units are subject to ongoing inspections and must comply with standards set by the California Department of Public Health. At the time of inspection there were 95 male inmates in custody, ranging in age from 19 to 55 years.

There is a hobby craft program, a TV room, and a game/exercise area available to the inmates during off-duty hours. Family visitation is conducted on Saturdays and Sundays. Community volunteers provide spiritual and religious services. Inmates are aware of the opportunities and relative freedom afforded to them in Fire Camps and as a result, inmates conduct themselves accordingly.

Both CDCR and CAL FIRE provide ongoing training and feedback for inmates, including job performance evaluations. Inmates interviewed said they were grateful for the chance at learning new skills and gaining experience.

Fire Camp housing costs are \$50 a day per inmate as compared to Nevada County's Wayne Brown Correctional Facility costing \$70 or more a day per inmate.

FINDINGS

- F1.** The Fire Camp provides significant monetary savings and community service to local public entities.
- F2.** The Fire Camp provides fire prevention and fire suppression at significant cost savings to Nevada County.
- F3.** The low recidivism rate at the Fire Camp shows that the program has been successful.
- F4.** The camp is succeeding in the development of skills and discipline, assisting inmates to integrate into society on release.
- F5.** Fire Camps are a most cost effective way to house inmates.
- F6.** The Fire Camp appears to be well-maintained.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None required or requested.