

Brownley: CCC benefits county taxpayers



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A California Conservation Corps crew helps Caltrans clear some brush along Highway 126 in Santa Paula earlier this year. The work, which would normally take a week, was completed by the crew of 13 in one day.

- By Julia Brownley
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Stroll along Surfers Point, push a wheelchair onto McGrath State Beach or hike in the Matilija or Sespe Wilderness areas and you will likely see the hard work of the dedicated young men and women of the California Conservation Corps.

Ventura County is home to 80 corps members at the Camarillo Center — one of seven CCC residential centers established throughout the state over the last three decades.

In recent years, the crews from Camarillo Center have been involved in developing and implementing restoration projects to benefit endangered Southern California steelhead

trout. They've built trails for the U.S. Forest Service in the Ojai Ranger District, completed a cobble path in front of the ocean at Surfers Point and constructed a disabled-access elevated boardwalk at McGrath State Beach.

The CCC work crews are also dispatched to portions of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles counties for ongoing environmental conservation work.

But it's their work in emergency response that draws the most attention. Camarillo has two initial-attack firefighting crews working under the direction of CalFire. This year alone, the mobile crews have responded to dozens of fire calls and are available to also respond to floods, oil spills and search and rescue efforts off the Ventura coast.

In any given emergency, these 18- to-25-year-olds can be expected to put in 12-hour days for up to 14 consecutive days.

And how are these public servants rewarded for their important community contributions? It can't be the money because CCC members earn minimum wage for their efforts. In fact, the late B.T. Collins, a CCC director in the 1970s and '80s, described the essence of the CCC this way: "Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions and more!"

Throughout their average nine months of CCC duty, the men and women learn about service, sacrifice and camaraderie. They learn to love California and all it has to offer, and they better themselves by becoming more employable by honing their skills through on-the-job training in firefighting, environmental conservation and even culinary arts.

In addition, attendance in the CCC's education program is mandatory. High school dropouts earn diplomas, and all corps members enroll in career development courses and can work toward earning scholarship dollars. For those in need of literacy skill improvement, classes are available in reading, math, grammar and writing.

This year, as the CCC celebrates its 35th anniversary, Californians have come to understand how the CCC has touched the lives of tens of thousands of our fellow citizens. Since 1976, CCC members have provided more than 65 million hours of natural resource work — planting more than 20 million trees, improving nearly 2,000

miles of streams and fish habitat, building or maintaining 9,000 miles of trails and improving park and recreation areas.

CCC members also have spent more than 9 million hours of dedicated work in just about every large emergency, including vital pest eradication in agricultural areas. The CCC even has a new program that hires veterans to work on fuel reduction, forest thinning and wildlife education projects while training them for full-time firefighting and forestry jobs.

As a member of both the Assembly Natural Resources and Budget committees, I have studied firsthand how taxpayers have benefited from the CCC's cost-effective environmental enhancement programs. And as chair of the Education Committee, I appreciate how the CCC is creating opportunities to broaden the knowledge and future employability of thousands of young men and women each year.

Next time you see a uniformed corps member working to make our creeks, beaches and trails a little more beautiful — or the next time you see corps members risking their lives fighting a hillside blaze — please take a moment to say, "Thank you for your service."

Julia Brownley represents the 41st Assembly District, which includes portions of Ventura County.

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