

Conservation Corps enjoys new Camarillo facility

By Chris Stolz Thursday, June 9, 2011



PHOTO BY JUAN CARLO

California Conservation Corps members get off their fire vehicle and get ready to help Caltrans clear some brush along Highway 126 in Santa Paula. The CCC has moved into a new campus on Wright Road in Camarillo, 10 buildings strong, and crews can be dispatched for firefighting, trail clearance and other projects.



PHOTO BY JUAN CARLO

Josh McConnell with the California Conservation Corps picks up dead wood to be turned into wood chips along Highway 126 in Santa Paula. The crew was helping Caltrans clear some brush.



PHOTO BY JUAN CARLO

California Conservation Corps member Andrew Diaz passes some wood to Isaac Cervantes and he passes some to Kenny Closner as they help Caltrans clear some brush along Highway 126 in Santa Paula.

Juan Mercado, a supervisor at the newly opened California Conservation Corps camp in Camarillo, had feared 2 years ago that he might lose his job.

The recession had begun, and in January 2008 then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger slashed the budget for the agency that employed him and hundreds of other young people — to \$0.

"I've been in the program for 13 or 14 years, and I know what it's like to get cut," he said. "I was cut from a position in 2004. A lot of stuff goes through your mind. I got a family and two kids. But I kind of figured we have a lot of supporters around the state. It's a big part of who we are."

According to Susanne Levitsky, a spokeswoman for the CCC in Sacramento, former employees, legislators and friends came out in force to call for the agency's resurrection.

"We were fighting for our lives," she said. "It was tough economic times, but once the four previous governors of the state wrote a letter to Gov. Schwarzenegger, that did the trick."

The four ex-governors — two Republicans and two Democrats — reminded Schwarzenegger that the CCC did valuable work not just in youth employment, but also in natural disasters, working for 141 straight days fighting wildfires in 2007. They said the CCC saved the state an estimated \$20 million it otherwise would have spent on firefighters.

That same cost-saving idea now is at work at the CCC's new Camarillo center on Wright Road, inaugurated in March. The CCC has launched a pilot program in partnership with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, employing young people ages 18 to 25 on two full-time, 15-member crews, according to Division Chief Steve Heil.

"The reason it works here is that Ventura County is one of the higher fire-response areas in California," he said. "CalFire needs crews here. We have three inmate crews (at the state Ventura Youth Correctional Facility) next door, but if that's all we had, in a large fire we would have to bring in other crews from San Luis Obispo or Santa Maria or Los Angeles, so we would have a much longer response time."

Fire Capt. Tim Davis, who can supervise either the inmate crews or the more highly trained CCC teams in Camarillo, said fighting wildfires when they're still small can save taxpayers millions of dollars.

"You only hear about the ones that get away," he said. "Did you hear about the fire we had in Simi Valley last weekend? No? You never hear about the ones we catch. Ventura County has a great fire department, and we're here to complement them with our crews."

On May 21 near Lost Canyons Road in Simi Valley, the Ventura County Fire Department contained a blaze of about 17 acres in less than an hour. Because the fire began on a Saturday, when the CCC teams are customarily off duty, an inmate crew was called to assist county firefighters.

"In Ventura County, you have a lot of terrain that without hand crews, you would never get a line around that fire," Davis said. "CalFire likes the inmate crews program because they're on call seven days a week, but the Type I fire crews we have at the center, we want to be the best of the best, comparable to the federal hot-shots crews."

According to Christie Rochte, director at the Camarillo center, they are the only Type I crews the CCC has in the state. Although the young people are paid minimum wage for 40 hours a week, they live at the center during the workweek, receive hundreds of hours of training and can get certifications in emergency medicine, hazardous materials handling and other skills.

Asked recently if they were ready to fight a fire, Crew 21, standing at parade rest in front of a large red CalFire truck, shouted "Yeah!" all at once. For months, they've been cutting "hazard trees," building trails and clearing brush for other agencies and groups, including Naval Base Ventura County, the U.S. Forest Service near Ojai and Caltrans.

The Camarillo center's staff works to keep the crews trained and employed, and to find revenue to support the program. According to Rochte, in addition to its state funding, the center needs to raise \$1.4 million in reimbursements from other agencies and nonprofit groups this year.

The CCC was created in 1976 by Jerry Brown during his first stint as governor, modeled after Franklin D. Roosevelt's Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. The Camarillo center opened in 1977 at what is now CSU Channel Islands and is among the oldest in the state.

When CSUCI needed more space in 2007, the CCC center temporarily moved to an old school site on Vineyard Avenue in El Rio and waited for a new, \$17 million facility to be built on Wright Road.

It was a long wait. Originally expected to be finished in June 2009, the project was temporarily frozen in February 2009 due to the state budget crunch, even though it was 80 percent completed.

Over the years, in addition to firefighting, the CCC in Ventura County has helped build the Backbone Trail in the Santa Monica Mountains, built a boardwalk at McGrath State Beach and restored habitat for steelhead trout.

On a recent Thursday morning, a CCC crew attacked overgrown brush for Caltrans on a hill near Highway 126 in Santa Paula. It chainsawed, cut, chipped and cleared a bank of nearly 200 feet of seemingly impenetrable brush in a little more than an hour.

"What I like about these guys, there's no attitude," said Carlos Orzoco, overseeing the job for Caltrans. "It's, 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir.' You ask them to do something, it's done. They work their butts off."