

Crews come to Camarillo to prepare for floods

By Christopher Stolz Special to The Star

Posted January 5, 2012 at 5:19 p.m., updated January 5, 2012 at 7:16 p.m.



Photo by Anthony Plascencia, Ventura County Star/

Shaerley Pace of Long Beach helps a crew from the California Conservation Corps move a stack of sandbags during flood-response training Thursday in Camarillo.





On a sunny winter day, about 150 young members of the California Conservation Corps from the southern part of the state came to Camarillo for flood-response training Thursday.

Nine crews filled sandbags, built walls to preserve a mock levee from rising waters and sweated profusely in temperatures approaching 85 degrees at the corps' Camarillo center off Wright Road.

It was the first time the southern region of the corps trained for floods.

"Flood operations are extremely cold and extremely windy, with miserable conditions, even for the CCC," said Steve Kirsch, operations manager for a team from San Diego. "It's very hard, it's very long, and it's working nights. Teamwork is the only way to get through it. We're just showing them how to do that, despite getting lucky with the weather today."

Kris Escarda, a corps co-coordinator who came from Sacramento to observe the training exercise, said California must be prepared for floods and fires.

"Last year, we didn't get hit with big floods until March, even though we had rain and snow all over the state and everything was saturated," she said. "Definitely, there's plenty of time left in the winter for flooding, so it's good knowing we're prepared."

John Martinez, manager of emergency services in Sacramento, said the corps has about 1,200 California members who can be mobilized in case of disaster.

Jerry Brown created the corps in 1976 during his first stint as governor, modeling it after President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. The first Camarillo center opened in 1977 at what is now CSU Channel Islands. The new \$17 million facility opened last year.

Taking a break from passing sandbags Thursday, Angela Johnson, who has worked for six months on a crew based in Camarillo, said the corps is not just a job to her.

"I love being outdoors, I love working hard and I love being on a crew," she said. "It's not just going to work at a job. It's making a difference, and that's the most rewarding part of it. "

Dominique Ross, a member of a crew from Los Angeles, recalled battling a flood in San Diego in 2007 for two weeks straight, filling sandbags 16 hours a day in pounding rain.

"I get drained before I even start, thinking about flood work," she said.

Ruben Armstrong, another corps member from Los Angeles, said he had a hard time battling floods last year.

"I had just started with the CCC," he said. "I didn't feel I was ready for it, so I thought about it with a feeling of dread."

Tim Davis, a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection captain who oversees the Camarillo crews, said the goal is to prepare crew members for whatever will be required. Sometimes this means responding to disasters, but often it means sending the members on landscaping jobs for other agencies and nonprofits to help raise the \$1.5 million or so the center needs annually to support three crews.

"I am making sure our crew performs as work machines — employable, capable, superdynamic young individuals who will be looking for jobs," he said.

© 2012 Ventura County Star. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.