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Veterans clear brush near Country Estates

By Karen Brainard

A number of military veterans have been hard at work, clearing brush and maintaining a fuel break that helps to protect San Diego Country Estates from wildfire.

The veterans are part of a program that is a partnership of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the California Conservation Corps (CCC). The program helps veterans transition into civilian employment.



Veterans clear brush along a fuel break in the Barona Mesa area.

“The Veterans Green Corps program is a win-win for everyone,” said Will Metz, forest supervisor of the Cleveland National Forest. “It provides training and jobs for veterans and accomplishes much needed ecological restoration projects, including fuels reduction work.”

Crew members range in age from 19 to 26 and represent every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces.

“The forest service is a great partner and it’s a privilege to join with them to help veterans prepare for resource management careers through work on important forestry projects,” said David Muraki, CCC director.



Cleveland National Forest Public Affairs Officer Brian Harris, center, watches crews clear brush with veterans Amie Stokes and Branden Gray.

Muraki and forest service officials visited crews of military veterans on Thursday, Nov. 10, as they cleared and piled brush along a fuel break in the Barona Mesa area also known as Four Corners.

Two crews totaling about 20 workers cleared brush near the El Capitan Truck Trail. One crew is funded by the USFS and the other by the California State Assembly, said Brian Harris, public affairs officer for the Cleveland National Forest.

Ron Hall, whose 10 acres abuts the Cleveland National Forest, said he saw the crews hiking into the area to get to the fuel break and offered use of his property for them to park and have easier access to the forest land.

Hall knows how important it is to maintain that fuel break. He lost part of his barn in the 2003 Cedar Fire, and several nearby houses burned.

“I spent all night putting out hotspots all around,” he said.

The 2007 Witch Fire came within a quarter mile of his place, he said.



A crew member adds brush to a pile near Ron Hall's property, while off in the distance more crew members work along a hillside.

Hall said the veterans wave and say "hi" when they come to work.

"They're real respectful," he said.

Two veterans working in the crews are Amie Stokes, who served five years as a Marine Corps helicopter mechanic at NCAS Miramar, and Branden Gray, who had a four-year stint in the U.S. Marines that took him on tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He received two Purple Hearts for injuries he received in both countries.

The two veterans are working toward college degrees while they work full time in the veterans crews program.

"It's opened up a lot of doors," Stokes said of the program.

Gray, who was part of a Special Forces team that went to Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and North Korea, said he likes to keep busy.

"I wanted a similar pace I had in the military," he said. "I like working with the United States Forest Service guys. They're great. Super nice. I'm always learning. There's never really any downtime."

Their crew will work in the Cleveland National Forest through early next year. Crew Supervisor Ricky Osuna said they work through all kinds of weather.

Osuna said the crews had just completed training in the Sierras, learning such skills as fire brush reduction, timber cutting, and wildland firefighting.

As the veterans cut brush along the 300-foot wide fuel break, they added it to piles of brush that Osuna said will be burned in late December or January when it's cooler.

John Forster with Battalion 33 of the forest service's Palomar Ranger District, said the area being cleared consists of about 243 acres, an area that stretches four to five miles from Ramona Oaks Road south to El Capitan Truck Trail.

With the brush cut down, Forster said if there is a wildfire, it will drop to the ground when it reaches the break and then become more manageable.

"Hopefully this will help to slow it down," he said. Forster said the fuel break is maintained every two to four years.