

Military vets join Conservation Corps to cut trails through state's parks

By [JASON HOPPIN](#) Santa Cruz Sentinel
Posted: 05/21/2011 01:30:46 AM PDT



Workers from the state's Backcountry Trails Program level a patch...
(KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL)

With the state's financial crisis and resulting hiring freeze, thousands of seasonal workers could have ended up budget casualties, from lifeguards to backcountry trail crews.

But on Friday, a crew of 15 men and women -- including nine military veterans who comprise the state's first veteran's trail crew -- were pawing and pounding away at washed-out trails high in Wilder Ranch State Park. The local stop is the first step to bigger jobs for the crew -- it will later head to Shasta-Trinity National Forest and Sequoia National Park -- and perhaps a new career.

"This is my first time in California," said Greg Snider, an Army veteran from Ohio who worked as an air traffic controller, his face shining red from exertion from beneath a hard hat. "I'm seeing all the good parts."

State Secretary of Natural Resources John Laird helped push the hiring through, and he and State Parks Director Ruth Coleman visited the crew Friday. Joining them was California Conservation Corps Director David Muraki, who said the crews are an integral part of the public's experience in state and national parks, having carved trails through John Muir Wilderness, King's Canyon and Yosemite national parks. They're even responsible for the handrail that traverses Half Dome.

"They're the primary workforce keeping those trails open," Muraki said.

The crew is young, some of them at a crossroads in their lives. Many hope for a career in parks, and being on a backcountry trail crew is an entree to that, akin to boot camp -- something a majority of this crew has actually been through.

"I love the outdoors. I love the conservation work and I thought it was a great opportunity," said Aaron Enrique-Hernandez of Santa Rosa, a former U.S. Marine.

A fellow ex-Marine had a similar take, with a twist.

"I never felt at home in the city. I got fed up with it," said Raul Gallegos of Los Angeles. "Plus, I had too many tickets."

Two UC Santa Cruz graduates were among the crew, both women. One said she wanted to take the chance to do something like this while she was still young. The other said she came for the hard, under-the-sun-and-stars labor.

"I just wanted to learn what it means to work hard, in the purest sense," said Raquel Carrillo, who grew up in the Central Valley.

The trail crews are now camping at Rancho del Oso in Big Basin Redwoods State Park. But when they head into more remote destinations, they will sleep where they work. The work is hard, with hours of pounding dirt, clearing brush [including poison oak], building bridges and hauling rocks and gravel in wheelbarrows.

Conservation Corps Backcountry Trails Program Coordinator Phillip LaFollette said he hopes the program helps veterans get exposure to parks. While veterans' can get preferences for hiring, they often don't have the experience to match up with other job candidates.

"Coming out of this program after five-and-a-half months, our hope is they'll have the kind of experience to make them real competitive," LaFollette said.

Kirby Fosgate, a local coordinator for State Parks, sees another benefit to having veterans on the crew.

"They take instruction better than any crew I've seen in 30 years," Fosgate said with a smile.

BACK COUNTRY CREWS

Military veterans join the ranks of state Conservation Corps, setting the stage for a career in the parks service.