

Angora thinning project gives vets chance to learn job skills

By Kathryn Reed

Chain saws hum. The thud of a tree crashing to the ground reverberates through the mountain air. Young men chatter above the noise.

A group of out of place spectators in hardhats watches the work as though this is something unique in the forest adjacent to houses in Lake Tahoe.

And in some ways it is.

On Wednesday, nine U.S. military veterans were part of the crew felling trees killed from the 2007 Angora Fire, piling them in teepee-like formations with the idea they could be burned this fall. (At times 19 veterans have been working in the burn area.)

A \$1.5 million pilot program between the U.S. Forest Service and California Conservation Corps called Veterans Green Corps is giving veterans the opportunity to learn a skill and potentially be hired by the federal agency. Vets receive priority-hiring status as long as they have the necessary skills.



Doug Glover of

the USFS cuts
a snag.
Photos/Lisa
Herron/USFS

“It’s not only a good thing to do, it’s the right thing to do,” Randy Moore, USFS Pacific Southwest regional forester, said.

He was in South Lake Tahoe on Aug. 31 to witness the work firsthand.

Besides the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, the Cleveland and Sierra national forests are part of the pilot.

A certain level of maturity not often seen in fresh CCC recruits is the noticeable difference with the military guys.

“In some ways it’s easier,” Mike Asprey with the South Shore CCC group said of the vets. “The military taught them how to follow instructions. They were already taught how to work hard.”

Their work involves thinning by hand 40 acres of the 3,000-plus acres that were burned in the Angora Fire. On this day they are working on the ridge in the Tahoe Mountain area where firefighters made a valiant stand to keep the fire from consuming homes in the Angora Highlands.

Another difference, though, is none of the military guys is from the mountains – so they need a little educating about the woods.

Only dead trees are being taken out – and none is more than 20 inches in diameter per the USFS prescription.



Gabe Foster of the USFS, left, watches veteran John Gallagher on Aug. 31 fell a tree.

Victor Uriz, a conservation supervisor with the CCC, is on hand. He talks about the hard work that is going on. He doesn't dwell on the fact that over the ridge on Mule Deer Drive is the house he rebuilt – his being one of the 254 that was lost four years ago when a smoldering campfire reignited into what is now known as the Angora Fire.

One of those working is John Gallagher, 26, of Redding. He spent 10 months with the Army in Iraq. He's appreciative of this opportunity, he says with a chain saw slung over his shoulder. He's hoping this experience will lead to being hired on as a hotshot with the Forest Service.

While on this assignment, the military crew is staying at the CCC barracks in Meyers.

Besides training in tree felling/thinning, the military guys also have gone through fire training. Some have been working prescribed burns in the basin.

Mostly it's white fir and Jeffery pine being taken out. The project started three weeks ago, is 50 percent complete and should wrap up by the end of the month.