

State: Plenty of inmates to fight fires

By KCRA-TV

The state expects to have nearly as many inmates available to help during this year's firefighting season as it did before a 2-year-old law began sending lower-level felons to county jails instead of state prisons, officials said Wednesday.

Currently, 3,820 inmates are training in the state's 44 fire camps, said state corrections department spokeswoman Dana Simas.

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors this week approved a five-year contract sending up to 200 of its offenders to the state-run camps as an alternative to keeping them in jail. The contract will cost the county \$46 a day per inmate.

That would boost the camp population to more than 4,000 inmate firefighters, about the same as before the law enforcement realignment law took effect in October 2011.

California relies heavily on inmate firefighters to dig fire lines and cut brush to halt the spread of wildfires. In a typical year, the inmates work more than 2.5 million hours fighting fires and responding to floods, earthquakes and other disasters. The state projects that it saves more than \$80 million annually over what it would cost to hire employees to do the same work.

But officials had feared the program would be endangered by the state law enacted in response to federal court orders to reduce prison crowding.

The population of California's 33 adult prisons has dropped by about 25,000 inmates, but Simas said a sufficient number of

camp-eligible inmates are still serving lengthy prison sentences that were imposed before the new law took effect.

Moreover, the department re-evaluated its security classifications, so more lower-security offenders are now eligible for the camps. By 2015, a projected 7,000 additional inmates will be at the lower security level required of inmate firefighters. Inmates who are convicted of arson, violent or sexual crimes are ineligible.

The state had more than 4,500 inmate firefighters when the prison population was at its peak in 2006.