

30% of Calif. forest firefighters are prisoners



Inmate crews were used on the Washington Fire near Markleeville this summer. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Julia Lurie, Mother Jones

Here's a kind of crazy stat: Between thirty and forty percent of California's forest firefighters are state prison inmates. The state has become a tinder box of sorts from a four-year drought, and roughly 4,000 low-level felons are on the front lines of the state's active fires. Here's what's going on:

Why are prisoners fighting fires?

For years, California's prison system has operated a number of "conservation camps," in which low-level felons in the state prison system volunteer to do manual labor outside, like clearing brush to prevent forest fires or fighting the fires themselves. A handful of other states have similar programs,

but, with roughly 4,000 participants, California's program is by far the largest. At its best, the program is a win-win situation: Inmates learn useful skills and spend time outside of the normal confines of prison, and the collaboration with Cal Fire saves the state roughly \$80 million a year.

For each day they work in the program, the inmates receive a two-day reduction from their sentences.

Participants make \$2 per day in the program and \$2 an hour when they're on a fire line. That may sound paltry, though it's not bad by prison standards: Many prison jobs bring in less than \$1 per hour. In addition, for each day they work in the program, the inmates receive a two-day reduction from their sentences.

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