

Calif. may allow inmate firefighters with violent pasts



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

By Associated Press

California officials are considering allowing inmates with violent backgrounds to work outside prison walls fighting wildfires, and the idea is generating concerns about public safety.

The state has the nation's largest and oldest inmate firefighting unit, with about 3,800 members who provide critical assistance to professional firefighters. That's down from about 4,400 in previous years, however, and so prison officials are looking for ways to add inmates.

Now, only minimum-security inmates with no history of violent crimes can participate. Starting next year, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is proposing adding inmates convicted of violent offenses such as assaults and robberies, if their security classification level has been

reduced after years of good behavior.

Officials also are seeking to allow inmates who have up to seven years left on their sentences instead of the current five. Arsonists, kidnappers, sex offenders, gang affiliates and those serving life sentences for murder and other crimes would still be excluded.

“All it does is enlarge the pool of inmates we look at, but it doesn’t change the nature of the inmate that we put in camp,” Corrections spokesman Bill Sessa told the Associated Press. “We still are not going to put an inmate in camp that has a violent attitude.”

The changes are pending final approval within the Corrections Department. They still have not been sent to the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, which says it also must sign off.

The proposal comes at a time when the overall prison population is smaller and drought has created the potential for explosive wildfires like the ones that recently roared through the Sierra foothills and communities north of Napa, in Northern California.

Mike Lopez, president of the union representing state firefighters who oversee inmates at fire scenes, supports a robust inmate program but worries about what the proposed changes could bring.

“Any acceptance of criminals with a violent background calls into question the security of our membership,” he said, adding, “at what risk is CalFire willing to go to get those inmates?”