

Decline in inmates hampers fire fight



Inmates were used on the Washington Fire near Markleeville in 2015. Photo/Carolyn E. Wright/Copyright 2017

By Lizzie Johnson, San Francisco Chronicle

Thomas Rohl adjusted the 30-pound pack strapped to his back and hopped into a nearby fire rig. He was in a remote part of Solano County, on his way to help put out a grass fire smoldering a few miles to the west.

It's backbreaking, dangerous work. But it beats prison.

Rohl and minimum-security inmates like him are a firefighting force the state counts on every year when the hills dry up and the weather gets hot. But there's a problem: Thanks to changes that have redirected many low-risk offenders who used to crowd the state's lockups, California is heading into the height of this year's fire season with a reduced number of what one official called "the Marines" of wildfire fighters.

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