

Fighting Fires, Changing Lives

Eel River Conservation Camp Civil Grand Jury Report

Released April 30, 2026

SUMMARY

“Without a doubt, if there is a program within the state that can help somebody go from an incarcerated life to never coming back to an incarcerated life, this is the program that can do it.”

Fred Money, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation¹

The Grand Jury is required by state law to “inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.” Beyond the need to know whether these institutions are well run and pose no threat to our community, isn’t it important to know how your tax dollars are being spent and whether this investment of your money is benefiting you?



Conservation camps, also known as “fire camps,” are unique state prisons - operated cooperatively between the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR).

Firefighters working a wildfire scene

¹ Captain Fred Money, quoted in the [Sacramento Bee Article on the Importance of Fire Crews 053124](#)

The primary purpose of fire camps is to provide firefighter inmates to assist in containing and extinguishing wildfires throughout California.

The Eel River Conservation Camp #31 (Eel River Fire Camp) in Redway houses male² inmates who have been convicted of non-violent, low-level crimes. Inmates meeting these qualifications can volunteer to be placed in the camp after being evaluated by CDCR staff for physical and behavioral fitness.

Inmates provide critical, demanding and dangerous firefighting and suppression services at wildfire sites. In return, they are compensated through reduced sentences and by earning wages. Inmates learn important employable skills that are transferable to post-incarceration community life - all while living in a fence-free camp in a rural, natural setting.

The Grand Jury's survey of 20% of this camp's inmates confirmed that the natural environment and a community more reflective of post-incarceration life contributes to their ability and incentive to make positive changes.

Recent legislative changes increased pay, increased time credits, and allowed for post-incarceration expungement.³ These changes provide substantial incentives for eligible inmates to volunteer to participate in the fire camp program, to comply with its rules and regulations, and to successfully complete the program.

For taxpayers, inmates being released earlier than their original sentence date means fewer dollars needed to operate prisons. Learning new employable skills reduces the likelihood of recidivism and potentially adds new employees who contribute to state tax coffers. When not fighting fires, inmates clear brush, perform prescribed burns, abate roadway weeds and clean cemeteries, serving and benefiting our communities at no additional cost to the taxpayers.

Overall, the Grand Jury was impressed with the condition, operation and function of the Conservation Camp during our inspections. The Grand Jury observed that safety

² CDCR has three fire camps in the state exclusively for women inmates

³ Records expungement for former conservation camp firefighters: [CDCR and AB 2147](#)

precautions were in place, safety equipment was up to date, and inmates appeared healthy, adequately clothed, housed and fed. Inmates seemed at ease, cooperative with, and respectful of, each other and staff, proud of the work they do, and of the skills they are acquiring.

Background

California Penal Code section 919(b) requires every Civil Grand Jury to inquire annually into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county. “Public prisons” has been interpreted to mean any government facility that detains persons for longer than 24 hours. Eel River Conservation Camp is one of the facilities that meets this requirement.

Eel River Conservation Camp (Eel River Fire Camp) sits on 168 acres of mixed forest and grassland in the mountains near Redway. It first opened on February 2, 1967. It is



an all-male minimum security facility jointly operated by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). It is one of 31 California conservation camps (located in 24 counties) that are commonly known as fire camps.

Camp buildings, lawn and trees

The mission of Eel River Fire Camp is “to support state, local and federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies including fires, floods, and other natural disasters. Additionally, hand crews respond to rescue efforts in local parks or flood suppression.”⁴

“It is estimated through the emergency responses to fires, floods, and project work Eel River Conservation Camp provided cost avoidance in excess of a million dollars per year to the taxpayers of California.”⁵

Eel River Fire Camp is a major distribution center for camp food and supplies to three northern California Conservation Camps: Eel River, Konocti and Trinity. Eel River Fire Camp orders, receives, and fills requisition orders from, and ships food and supplies to, the other two camps. Inmates perform most warehouse work supervised by a staff warehouse manager.

Facilities

Eel River Fire Camp can accommodate as many as 120 inmates. The day after the Grand Jury’s initial visit to the camp, an additional thirty inmates arrived from Alder Fire Camp in Del Norte County. The Alder Fire Camp subsequently closed, increasing the total inmate population at the Eel River camp to 103. The inmate population as of mid-March had been reduced to 90.

The camp has two roads for access or evacuation, one at the front of the camp and one towards the rear. Both access roads cross the Eel River. Although staff reported that many earthquakes have been felt in the camp, they reported the roads into and out of the camp had never experienced earthquake damage nor been blocked by landslides.

⁴ [Eel River Fire Camp Mission Statement](#)

⁵ Taxpayer savings from work performed by fire camp inmates in Camp History section of [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Eel River Conservation Camp website](#)

Inmates

All inmates in the camp have jobs. Most are firefighters. Others provide clerical and administrative support, meal preparation, janitorial and laundry services, clothing inventory and distribution, equipment and vehicle maintenance, warehouse stocking and distribution and camp brush clearing. They may work as a forklift driver, an auto mechanic, a bulldozer operator, or they may perform small engine repair. Inmates can work on a variety of community service projects. Community service projects can include brush clearing, highway weed abatement, cleaning cemeteries, conducting prescribed burns and rebuilding trails in state parks in Humboldt County.

A property owner can submit their community service project proposal to CAL FIRE and, if approved, the camp fire crews will perform the work free of charge. Outside of fire season, all the camp's fire crews may be engaged in community service projects as much as five days a week, 40 hours per week.

CDCR provides for the needs and supervision of all inmates while in camp and not engaged in firefighting, fire training or fire prevention tasks.

The only formal job training available to inmates is culinary arts training for the lead camp cook, firefighting training for firefighters and a water treatment tester/inspector certification for inmates with that duty. All other training is on-the-job.

Inmates assigned to camp can be at the camp for as little as a month to several years.

Inmate Complaint Process

Staff encourage inmates to talk to them about any complaints they have. Alternatively, inmates can complete a form which is placed in a locked box. The complaints are transported to the regional conservation camp headquarters at Sierra Conservation Camp for disposition. Thus complaints are confidential with camp staff having no access to the complaints. Staff anticipated that this paper process would soon become digital with the complaint form made available on inmates' tablets for faster processing.

Firefighter Inmates

Firefighting is grueling, dangerous work. Firefighters carry 50-pound packs in extreme heat, wearing layers of fire protective clothing, climbing steep inclines, hiking for miles, all while being subjected to potential health risks. California relies heavily on firefighter inmates to provide essential firefighting services across the state. Firefighter inmates are organized into hand crews of 16 men each. A hand crew uses hand tools to clear fire lines and brush in both active fires and as fire prevention. “Hand crews are truly what extinguishes wildland fires,” said Erich Schwab, division chief for CAL FIRE’s Amador-El Dorado Unit sector.⁶

Camp inmates are selected to be firefighters by volunteering, meeting physical fitness requirements, and successfully interviewing with the CDCR and CAL FIRE staff.

CAL FIRE trains and equips all firefighter inmates and manages and supervises them when they are called out to a fire site. CAL FIRE treats the firefighting inmates the same as their own firefighters when on a fire assignment. CAL FIRE is responsible for the custody of inmate firefighters who are accompanied by CDCR officers 24 hours per day while on fire assignment or work projects.



Fire hand crews are essential in areas with steep terrain where heavy equipment can't go. Crews often hike miles to get to a fire and use hand tools to cut literally miles of firebreak.⁷

Inmate firefighters clearing brush

^{6, 7} Hand crews extinguish wildfires [Sacramento Bee Article on the Importance of Fire Crews 053124](#)

Firefighters can earn a firefighting certificate, making them eligible for employment with CAL FIRE. Some do become professional firefighters with CAL FIRE after release. CDCR liaison for conservation camps, Captain Fred Money, says inmate firefighters can "...absolutely be hired by CAL FIRE after they leave on parole... Without a doubt, if there is a program within the state that can help somebody go from an incarcerated life to never coming back to an incarcerated life, this is the program that can do it."⁸

When Camp fire crews travel out of county for a fire, they carry an "out of county bag" which contains everything they need to stay overnight, including a sleeping bag, change of clothes, and toiletries. They sleep on the ground, as do staff. When not fighting fires, inmate firefighters work from 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Monday - Friday on brush clearing, firebreak projects, other fire prevention activities, and training to maintain their physical fitness to fight fires.

Firefighters can be discharged from the program for disciplinary issues, failure to work, or medical issues that preclude them from working in a rigorous duty position.

METHODOLOGY

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (the Grand Jury) conducts an annual inspection of detention facilities to ensure the proper management and humane treatment of individuals in custody as well as to check for compliance with safety codes. The Grand Jury conducted an inspection of the Eel River Conservation Camp located in Redway, California.

⁸ Fire camps turn inmates lives around [Sacramento Bee Article on the Importance of Fire Crews 053124](#)

The Grand Jury

- conducted two site visits;
- evaluated facilities using the California Grand Jurors Association Detention Facility Inspection Form,⁹ to ensure compliance with relevant state laws and regulations including California Code of Regulations, Title 15;
- inspected the Camp Register as required by state regulations;
- interviewed CDCR and CAL FIRE personnel;
- conducted an anonymous survey of approximately 20% of the inmates;
- reviewed documents, state laws, policy, CDCR Operations Manual, serious incident statistics from December 1, 2024 - December 1, 2025, literature, academic and news sources; and
- asked follow-up questions to confirm and clarify details.

DISCUSSION

Inmates

Most inmates currently in the camp are “short-timers” with little time left to serve on their sentence. Consequently, they are focused on doing things that will reduce their remaining time such as taking classes. Classes and programs that will reduce their time are: Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous, Self-Awareness, and "Go-In/Go-Out" (an anger management class). All of these classes are taught by inmates. Inmates can apply to teach a class, and if selected, are sent materials from the conservation camp northern administration center to use in teaching the class. A self-help inmate instructor will receive a notation in his file which can positively benefit him in a parole hearing.

Inmates receive pay for their work. The money they earn is placed in an account for them. That money can be used to buy items from the canteen or to make purchases

⁹ Link to [Detention Facility Inspection Form](#)

online. The canteen has food, snacks and a selection of items for purchase (such as CD players or radios). These items are selected from a state-approved catalog which features items built with see-through plastic to ensure safety for staff and inmates, and to prevent the devices being used to store contraband. Money can also be provided to inmates' accounts by family members and relatives.

Visitation

There are two requirements for visitation: the visitor must be approved, and the inmate may not be currently charged with any rules violations. Visitors may not have had any felony convictions or a history of disruptive behavior at the camp. Inmates on restricted privileges due to rules violations are not allowed to have visitors.

The camp can accommodate up to 20 visitors in the visitation room or outdoors. Video visits are done by computer in the visitation room. Barbeques and picnic tables are available outside. A two-bedroom house is available for family visits of up to three days.

Facilities

This camp has no fences, walls or other barriers to enclose the camp. Signs are posted along the camp perimeter identifying the camp boundaries that inmates are not allowed to cross without permission. Camp inmates, upon arrival, are required to sign a Camp Affirmation that affirms they understand the camp limits and that to go beyond the identified camp limits will amount to an escape. (See Appendix A).

Buildings at the camp range from inmate housing and custody administrative offices to those specific to the mission of the camp such as a kitchen, a greenhouse, and firefighting equipment/storage facilities. Some buildings are used for inmate training such as woodworking and mechanical repair. Other buildings provide non-work relaxation settings for inmates such as exercise rooms, visitation rooms, and television rooms with long wooden benches facing the television.



Communal toilets and showers for inmates

Bathrooms and inmate dorms are communal and afford little to no privacy. The toilet area is open 24/7. One toilet has a partial privacy wall. There is a changing area near the showers, which are communal. All bathroom facilities were clean on both days we visited.

Each dorm is a large, long room with undivided rows of beds on both side walls of the building. Each inmate has a narrow single bed with a thin mattress, a small locker and a small shelf. Personal lockers are provided and have a combination lock so each inmate can store his clothing and personal possessions. Staff have a master key to open all inmate lockers for inspection and security reasons.

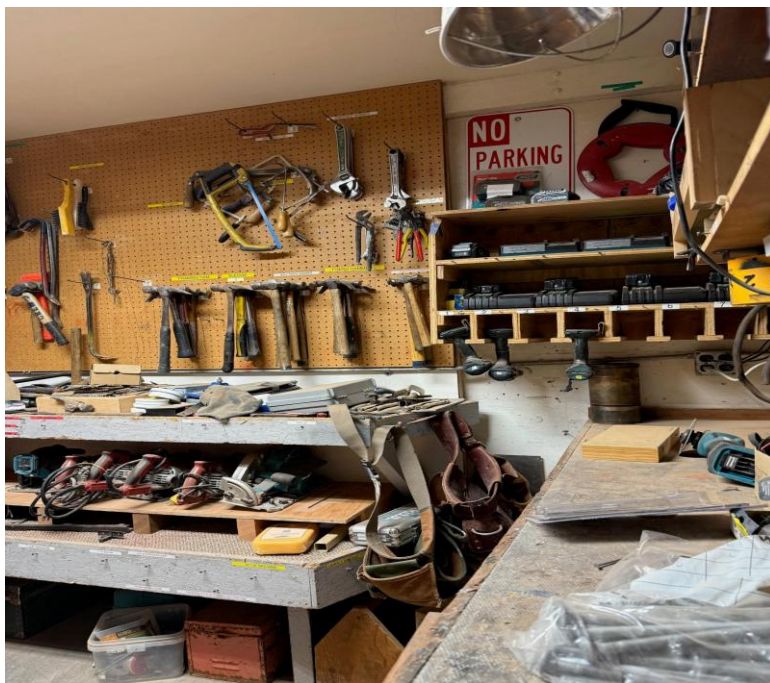
Dorm buildings are generally in good condition, however, jurors observed that most vents in each dorm had been pried open. The vents could be used to hide contraband. Staff are aware of this possibility and conduct periodic inspections.

Inmate housing was a concern during the initial visit due to crowded living conditions and two-tiered bunks, mostly due to preparation being made for incoming Alder Camp inmates. A vast improvement was observed in the dorms during the second visit with more spacious accommodations, and narrow single beds instead of double bunks for all inmates.

The commercial grade kitchen was clean and well-organized. All knives, metal utensils and volatiles in the kitchen, as well as in the warehouse, were in locked compartments for security.

Since the Grand Jury's site visit last year, the inmates installed an indoor meditation garden with a fountain, bench and flowers in the greenhouse. This provides a place where inmates can go during inclement weather for private, quiet time.

The vegetable and flower gardens in the greenhouse were flourishing under the care of one inmate with the assistance of one staff person. Produce is used in the kitchen and excess produce is given to elderly community members. The Fire Camp no longer has chickens or a chicken coop.



The wood working shop was well-equipped. Inmates use wood from trees felled onsite or removed from state parks for their projects. There is a mill in the camp to mill surplus logs into boards. Inmates create beautifully crafted wood signs and other wood items for the camp. Anything inmates make for themselves, they own and can ship out, or use as trade items with other inmates.

Wood shop workbench and tools

The Grand Jury inspected the clothing supply locker which is managed and staffed by one inmate. The locker was well organized and meticulously maintained. This inmate had completely reorganized the locker into its present state. The inmate that assisted the jury in inspecting the locker showed great pride in his management and organization

of the locker; this is one example of the opportunities the camp offers to inmates to gain both self-esteem and skills.



Clothing locker with organized shelves of clothing and work boots

Outdoor facilities include a basketball court, two handball courts, a volleyball court, a disc golf course, a barbeque, and a gazebo for inmates' guest visits. A softball field is planned.

Although there is a separate building that serves as a chapel, it was clearly not currently being used as a chapel. The building contained various musical instruments including a keyboard, guitars and a drum set that inmates can use if they have experience with the instruments.

There are two adequately maintained open-air exercise rooms with good lighting and gym floor mats which house treadmills, chest presses, and other exercise equipment. Music played from a radio as several inmates exercised during our visit.

We found the buildings to be clean and generally in good repair. The roadway throughout the camp had been recently repaved. Staff reported that potholes prior to pavement work had resulted in damage to some vehicles.

Facilities are open to inmates between 6:00 am and 10:00 pm. Inmates are not allowed to access recreational or housing areas during work shifts without staff permission.

The Grand Jury was given a tour of the warehouse. The warehouse has a large walk-in freezer, refrigeration units and a temperature-controlled room for grains and flour. Everything a camp needs to operate was contained within the warehouse, including food, cleaning supplies, clothing, business supplies, tools, boots, toiletries, firefighting clothing and gear.

Due to the efforts of staff and inmates, the warehouse was well managed and clean in spite of a cumbersome ordering process and distribution system, and an inefficient inventory system. Canned goods and supplies were neatly organized, sorted, stacked and labeled. The Grand Jury observed, however, many large labeled sections were very low in stock or were empty.

During the first site visit, the Grand Jury asked staff why several categories of the canned food stock were so extremely low. Staff explained that most of the supplies and food are first shipped to Lassen Conservation Camp, which serves approximately eight camps. The goods are then divided up and all food and supplies allocated for the Eel River, Konocti and Trinity camps are shipped to the Eel River facility.

The clerk who orders supplies for Eel River Fire Camp and the other camps it serves had recently left, so the position was vacant. No orders have been placed during this vacancy, causing some items of the Camp's canned food inventory to be exceedingly low. Despite this problem, the Eel River camp had sufficient food stocks for all inmate meals. If a specific out-of-stock foodstuff is needed, staff will purchase those items from a local grocery. It was explained that this manner of procurement was often cost-effective, particularly for many foods that are needed only in small quantity.

While it was encouraging to see how professional and dedicated the staff are, the Grand Jury was surprised to see how few rehabilitation resources are available to the camp. The jury was also surprised to learn that CDCR does not provide any instructors to teach employable skills that make use of the woodworking, sawmill, upholstery and machine shops and greenhouses at the camps. Inmates can only learn these skills informally if there happens to be another inmate or a staff person with the necessary

knowledge that can teach them. Inmates are not allowed to use any of the power equipment unless they have prior experience and knowledge in their use.

Some rehabilitation resources, such as the Hobby Room, are filled with equipment, machinery and other resources, waiting for either a resident inmate with the skill set to run the resource, or for outside volunteers to provide instruction. State funded rehabilitation resources are definitely lacking at the Eel River Fire Camp. Even the staff agreed, commenting that Eel River is not a "show-camp."

The camp has two computer networks that support administrative functions, video visits, tablets and internet access. The transfer speed of the older network is substandard and unreliable. This is, importantly, the network to which staff computers connect. This impacts staff's ability to work efficiently and reliably. The newer network supports video visitation and inmates' tablets.

Security and Safety

Contraband, consisting mostly of drugs, presents the most frequent security problem at the camp. While the camp has no fencing, it is located adjacent to a public refuse transfer station which is fenced. That fenced area has been used as a site to place contraband, making it easy to transport drugs and hide drugs near prison property. Camp staff have repaired the fence where contraband was being delivered. Administration is considering installing cyclone fencing near the refuse disposal station to reduce contraband transfers.

Staff conducts random searches of inmate property and drug-sniffing dogs are brought to the facility several times each year to control drug proliferation. Over the past two years, there were five incidences of inmate drug possession.

If an inmate is found guilty of a minor rules infraction, the penalty could involve job restriction, a temporary pay cut, or restricted use of his tablet (e.g., not able to access email during the penalty period). For a serious rule violation, such as being found with drugs or a cell phone, that inmate is removed from camp and immediately transported to Sierra Conservation Camp for detention and determination of a penalty if found guilty

of the offense. If found guilty, that inmate is no longer qualified to be assigned to a camp.

During the past year, there were approximately forty rules violations related to contraband. Camp lockdowns occur when an inmate leaves the camp perimeter. Upon staff becoming aware of a walk-away, inmates in the camp are then directed to go to and remain in their bunks until directed by staff to resume normal activities.

All fire extinguishers observed were tagged and up to date. Fire drills are conducted once a month during each shift. Smoke detectors were present in every building.

Training

All inmates are assigned tasks which generally require some training. In-camp roles include:

- Janitor
- Lead Cook
- Kitchen worker
- Clerk
- Landscaper
- Warehouse worker
- Automobile/small engine repair technician

The selection for a specific role is made by interview and a review of work history for the jobs that require more expertise and experience. For example, an inmate who has worked as an auto mechanic prior to incarceration would be a prime candidate for the last position on the list above.

Because the main function of the camp is firefighting and support, there is very specific training for the job of firefighter. To qualify for this position, inmates need to be motivated to work in a challenging environment and pass a physical fitness examination.

Inmates can obtain certification that can lead to greater employment opportunities in the fields of firefighting, culinary arts and water treatment testing/inspecting.

Influence of Camp Environment and Tasks Affecting Inmate Attitude and Recidivism

Inmates assigned as firefighters have significant motivation to comply with rules and avoid a return to prison following the passage of two legislative bills.

- In September 2020, Governor Newsom signed AB 2147 into law. This law allows former non-violent incarcerated people who participated in a CDCR conservation camp to have their records expunged. As a result, hiring barriers are removed and these inmates can seek firefighter jobs in the community.
- In October 2025, Governor Newsom signed AB 247 which raised inmate firefighter pay to \$19 per hour when assigned to active fire incidents. This bill also increased the rate at which inmates could reduce their sentence length to two days credit for every day at a fire camp.

Additional motivation includes:

- Firefighters are paid for 24 hours per day, from the time they leave camp until they return from a fire assignment.
- Inmates can get firefighting certification, professional culinary training if they are assigned as lead cook, and water treatment tester/inspector certification. The camp is currently working towards also offering forklift operator certification.
- Most camp inmates experience a greater sense of freedom and develop the ability to give back to the community. This gives the camp inmate a sense of pride in what they are doing.
- Inmates have the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Several former camp inmates on the fire team (5-10 in the past 7 years) worked hard and were promoted to "Swamper," which is a leadership position. These inmates turned

their life around and now work for CAL FIRE. Some have sent thank-you notes to staff.

- Camp life can lead to significant life changes. Some camp inmates expressed that they are learning to shift their focus from self needs and desires to the needs of family and others.
- Many inmates come from large metropolitan areas and have never been in a natural environment like the camp. Inmates reported it was a huge change for them and they found the natural setting calming and restorative.

Evidence that inmates respond well to this environment include:

- Staff knew of only two inmates that had been returned to prison due to rules violations or being deemed an escape risk in the past two years.
- Multiple former camp inmates have contacted camp staff and told them they are doing well and working in the trades.

Drug use has not been a major issue in the camp. This is likely due to the consequences of drug possession. Inmates are removed from camp for serious disciplinary issues such as violent behavior or drug possession. Staff reported they expect this reduces the likelihood of drugs being smuggled for use by inmates.

Rather than rely on staff reports and observations to determine inmates' attitudes regarding assignment to a camp, the Grand Jury conducted a group interview with 14 randomly selected inmates who agreed to be interviewed. This represented approximately 20% of the then current camp inmate population. There was strong endorsement of the following among a majority of those interviewed:

- Inmates were uniformly happy to be placed in a camp.
- Among the reasons for being satisfied with the setting:
 - Appreciation of the natural environment and lack of fences (versus a prison setting of concrete and iron) was described as beneficial and helpful in transitioning back to society at the end of a sentence; and

- An opportunity to more quickly reduce the remaining time on their sentence as well as the chance to gain skills as a firefighter.
 - Inmates who are firefighters have two days deducted from their sentence for each day in camp; inmates not on fire crews have one day deducted.
- Despite the absence of perimeter fencing, inmates identified family and preparations to be released from CDCR as their motivation for remaining within the camp boundaries.
- Most of the inmates interviewed had been placed at another fire camp prior to being sent to Eel River Fire Camp.
 - The majority stated they liked Eel River Fire Camp more than other camps due to the quality of food, available activities, and the natural environment.

Inmates were issued electronic tablets just prior to the Grand Jury’s visit to the Eel River camp in November. The tablets provide communication options such as photos, video calls, and telephone contact for inmates. This device also allows access to educational materials, audiobooks, news, therapeutic content, and games. The tablets are secured, meaning inmates cannot access general internet or social media sites.

The ability of inmates to have much greater contact with family members has improved the outlook for a number of inmates as reported by the group interview participants. The ability to easily communicate with family with the tablet has also indirectly become a motivator to follow camp rules as a minor rule violation could result in staff electronically removing telephone and video call access for the duration of the penalty period.

There were no escapes or “walk-aways” over the past two years. Any inmate who attempts to escape from a conservation camp is ineligible to be placed again at a conservation camp. An important element in an inmate’s adjustment when paroled is maintaining and fostering family relationships. Using tablets to remain in contact with family while at the camp maintains and strengthens those relationships.

The ease and lack of tension, fear or conflict in the camp was palpable to the Grand Jury during its visits. All interactions observed between staff, inmates and the visiting jurors were respectful and cordial. Staff rarely interfere in inmate conflicts, allowing inmates to resolve issues amongst themselves, as they will need to be able to do when returned to the community. Staff only intervenes if inmates are unable to resolve their differences amicably.

There are two resident pet dogs who move freely throughout the facility. They have a calming and normalizing impact on the camp. One dog has become very attached to a particular inmate. His doggie bed, food and water dishes were at the foot of the inmate's bed.

Firefighters



Inmate firefighting hand crews, composed of physically fit inmates convicted of low-level crimes, are fewer than ever before in California. This reduces critical state firefighting resources. Under AB 109, the “Public Safety Realignment Act,” implemented in 2011, the length of incarceration

Firefighters working on a fire

for many lower-level, non-violent offenders was either reduced, or their sentences were changed so that time would be served in county jails and probation instead of within the state prison system. This change significantly reduced the number of inmates available and suitable to volunteer to serve their time on a fire crew.

“... [A] steady decline in the state’s prison population due to sentencing reform has left many of California’s minimum security conservation camps operating at half capacity or less. And as the 2024 fire season kicks into high gear, CAL FIRE is short 110 of its 236 budgeted hand crews...In January 2010, close to 4,000 people lived in California’s fire camps. As of early May [2024], only 1,867 of the camps’ beds were filled”¹⁰

As a result, eight fire camps were closed in late 2020. In December, 2025, two to three more fire camps were being closed, including Alder Camp in Del Norte County.

Eel River Fire Camp currently has 4 hand crews. In 2025, Eel River Fire Camp firefighters were dispatched to 31 “call outs” - calls to fight fires.



Inmate firefighters clearing a firebreak

Typical Camp Schedule versus Schedule During a Fire Event

When in camp, inmates must awaken each morning and report to breakfast at 7:30 a.m. The hours for assigned jobs for inmates typically begin at 8:30 a.m. and conclude at

¹⁰ Reduced number of inmate fire crews [Sacramento Bee Article on the Importance of Fire Crews 053124](#)

4:30 p.m. Dinner is served at 5:30 p.m. Inmates are provided a bag lunch during the breakfast meal; lunch can be eaten at a time of the inmate's choosing as long it does not interfere with his work tasks. Staff have eight-hour shifts supervising inmates.

This schedule changes when the camp is summoned to a fire site. Location of the fire additionally affects the schedule. Within Humboldt County, custody officers and inmates are transported to a fire site where inmates perform firefighting duties. All return to the camp at the end of their shift (unless otherwise directed). When a fire site is outside of Humboldt, staff and inmates will remain on the site of the fire until no longer needed. The work schedule is very different in this situation, as staff and inmates remain on the job for 24-hour shifts before being sent to the designated base camp for a 24-hour period for rest, showers, and change of clothing.

Assignment to a fire event can also change the schedule for staff and inmates not responsible for fire containment. Eel River Fire Camp has mobile kitchens which can be sent to the base camp to provide meals to support all personnel involved in fire suppression. In one instance, a very large fire had the consequence of only two inmates and one staff remaining at the camp with all other staff and inmates involved in direct or indirect firefighting efforts.

Staffing

Staffing levels changed late last year due to the closing of the Alder Conservation Camp in Del Norte County. Approximately 30 inmates were transferred from that site to Eel River Fire Camp on November 17, 2025, necessitating additional correctional staff. The inmate population for each camp was significantly below capacity and combining the camps was likely a cost-saving measure.

Despite the isolated geography of the Eel River Fire camp, staffing is not typically problematic according to correctional personnel. The atmosphere in a camp setting, both for inmates and staff, is significantly different than that in a formal prison setting. Differences include:

- Gang politics are not present (or are a very minor influence on behavior).

- Conflicts between inmates are generally settled amicably rather than violently.
- Inmates who qualify for camp are less dangerous in that they are convicted of less serious crimes and generally have a much shorter history of serious criminal behavior and consequently shorter sentences than the overall inmate prison population.

The consequence of these factors is that danger to custody staff and inmates is notably lessened in a camp. One staff person transferred to the camp after more than a dozen years at a maximum-security prison specifically to avoid the tense interactions and confrontations in a prison setting. This staff person plans to remain at Eel River Fire Camp despite needing to commute over 200 miles at the end of the week's shift. This person added that many of the other officers currently assigned to Eel River Fire Camp sought this posting for the same reasons.

Staff accommodations at the site include several bedrooms and a lounge area with a television and a sauna. Staff also can use the beds in the family visitation house if no visits are scheduled. Many staff prefer personal housing options such as campers or recreation vehicles which are parked onsite.

When staff accompany inmate firefighters to a fire site, staff work 24-hour shifts. Although CDCR staff are primarily responsible for inmate oversight, they are also trained by CAL FIRE in the use of fire equipment.

FINDINGS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

- F1:** The Eel River Conservation Camp meets or exceeds goals for contributions to the community, leading to a healthy, trusting relationship between the camp and the community.

- F2:** Basic job skills are learned and practiced, making Eel River Conservation Camp inmates more employable and thus benefitting themselves, their families and their communities.
- F3:** Through training, education, and on-the-job work experience, inmate employment opportunities post-incarceration increase, helping the Eel River Conservation Camp recidivism rate decline.
- F4:** The Humboldt community enjoys considerable cost savings by using inmate labor for projects such as weed abatement, prescribed burns, fuel reduction, rebuilding trails in state parks, landscape maintenance in public places and other special projects.
- F5:** Temporary overcrowding conditions due to dormitory renovations occurring during the Grand Jury's November, 2025, visit had been remediated by the December, 2025 visit, improving inmate living conditions and wellbeing.
- F6:** Internet service that supports staff is unreliable and the transfer speed is substandard. This hampers staff's ability to work efficiently and reliably. **(R1)**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1:** Upgrade the slower of the Eel River Fire Camp internet networks to current standards for upload and download internet speeds by July 1, 2027. **(F6)**

RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- The respondent agrees with the finding; or

- The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action; or
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation; or
- The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency where applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report; or
- The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

Invited Responses

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury invites the following entity to respond.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations

(All findings, all recommendations)

Responses are to be sent to:

The Honorable Judge Timothy A. Canning
Humboldt County Superior Court
825 5th Street, Eureka, CA 95501

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury
PO Box 657; Eureka, CA 95502 A

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

APPENDIX A

Staff Witness Signature Printed Name Rank/Title Date

STATE OF CALIFORNIA Operational
Guideline No. 300

Attachment A

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS CDC 142 (Rev 2/96)

CAMP AFFIRMATION

I have been informed and understand the rules of the Director of Corrections and of the conservation camp to which I am assigned. The camp limits have been designated to me. I understand that to go beyond the camp limits without approval and/or supervision, or to leave a designated work area or fire camp area without permission or supervision, or to leave any employee who is responsible for my custody without permission, is a violation of the Director's Rules and laws pertaining to escape.

Witness

Inmate Signature

Date Signed

Inmate's Number

Operational Guideline No. 300