

Prison Fire Camps

Across the Western region of the United States, climate change is bringing about a new intensity and duration to the wildfire seasons, with several record-setting fires in recent years threatening the lives and property of thousands (Jarvis, 2013; Morris, 2018). Poised to protect the public against this growing threat are dozens of remote fire camps scattered across states like California which are filled with hard-working men and women serving as wildland firefighters (Goodman, 2010). There is something peculiar about these camps though—they are prisons, and their firefighters are also inmates.

California stands with several states, including Arizona and Washington among others, in using prison labor to fight wildfires (Jarvis, 2013). These incarcerated firefighters are sent on grueling and potentially deadly assignments to control and extinguish major wildfires, sometimes working in eighteen-hour shifts, where they use hand and power tools to cut fire lines and conduct controlled burns to prevent the spread of the flames, all for less than two dollars an hour (Hager, 2015, Goodman, 2010, Weill, 2020). In truth, fighting fire is just one of many assignments camp residents carry out. The bulk of their time is spent working lengthy shifts performing unskilled, manual labor for various local, state, and federal agencies, called “grade work” (Goodman, 2010). Although fighting fire at these camps does not pay well in itself, the more common grade work nets them even less—about three dollars a day—and feels far more exploitative to the residents assigned to it (Weill, 2020; Goodman, 2010). Both in grade work and in firefighting, questions arise about who actually benefits from these programs and the

degree to which these incarcerated workers are being exploited (Weill, 2020; Goodman, 2010; Jarvis, 2013).

The work assigned at these camps is intended to serve a rehabilitative function, and while there is some anecdotal support for fire camps like the ones in California delivering positive results for its participants, few of their work assignments offer much in terms of marketable skills, and access to traditional rehabilitative, educational, and vocational programs is more limited in this environment than a walled prison (Goodman, 2010; 2012). While it remains unclear how beneficial these fire camps are for the residents and their futures, the states employing them benefit from these camps in a much clearer way. Those who are incarcerated do not share the minimum wage protections that most Americans do, allowing for these fire crews to be paid just a few dollars per day while states see savings in the millions (Jarvis, 2013; Hager, 2015).

For the residents manning these fire camps, the firefighting work provides them with the most technical and marketable skills, however it becomes incredibly difficult to find similar careers once they are released. In addition to the typical challenges of finding employment with a felony on record, they are also prevented from acquiring the licenses needed for many firefighting positions (Weill, 2020). California has recently taken some steps towards removing these barriers for their inmate fire crews post-release, but there is more that can and should be done to expand the programs and apply them to other states, as will soon be discussed.

There are a few factors that tip the scale on these camps from rehabilitative and towards exploitative. For one, rehabilitation tends to come from residents seeking to improve themselves, rather than by the nature of the work. Being able to help the community directly does help the residents see themselves in a more positive light, but the job itself is not as important as the

rehabilitative mindset and the risks firefighting imposes are not necessary for the betterment of the residents. As for other benefits of the program, staff anecdotally tout abstract benefits for residents, like improved work ethic and punctuality (Goodman, 2012). Having a strong work ethic is surely a plus, but in terms of job readiness, these skills do not compare to the more established and comprehensive educational and vocational programs that walled prisons can offer (Goodman, 2012).

Benefits to the governments are evident, as many states find themselves relying heavily on this cheap labor supply amidst the escalation in fire seasons in recent years. At the same time, civilian wildland fire crews face understaffing and hiring freezes, routine budget cuts, and an expectation to work excessive overtime (Jarvis, 2013; Morris, 2018). The failure to appropriately fund fire prevention and management leads states to rely on inmates in order to keep wildfires under control (Jarvis, 2013). States save money in two ways: pay and training. By paying between one and two dollars an hour for firefighting, and only a few dollars a day when doing grade work, California saves eighty million dollars a year (Hager, 2015). Not only do civilian fire crews cost more to staff, but they also take far longer to train than do incarcerated fire crews, who only receive twenty-nine hours of classroom instruction (Weill, 2020; cdcr.ca.gov). This disparity in the level of training given to civilian and incarcerated fire crews before being deployed into the same deadly environment stands in contrast to principles of prisoner care, which call for the equal protection of incarcerated and free workers, including in training (Weill, 2020).

It seems that states are benefiting more from these fire programs than its participants, given that civilian firefighting jobs are often inaccessible to people with a felony conviction on their record, due in part to their inability to obtain EMT or Paramedic licenses (Weill, 2020).

This means their time spent firefighting has little outside benefit, while the grade work that residents spent the rest of their time doing rarely translates into any marketable skills of its own, leaving those exiting the program with few career options (Goodman, 2010). By enacting AB 2147 in California, formerly incarcerated persons who worked on fire crews have been given the chance to have their records expunged, clearing the way for needed licenses. Additionally, the state is offering an eighteen-month training program to transition exiting inmate fire crew members into full-fledged firefighters (cdcr.ca.gov). The expungement still requires a hearing though and is limited to only the camp residents who worked on the fire line. Other states do not yet have comparable laws and programs in place either, which leaves the path to employment after custodial release uncertain for many.

In their current state, these fire camp programs could certainly benefit from a greater focus on the rehabilitative aspect of the fire camps and through enacting three specific measures. First, to address the concerns of labor exploitation, which frustrates the ultimate goal of rehabilitation, residents should be paid the minimum wage. This is undoubtedly a controversial request, but it would compensate the residents for the dangers they are exposed to, it would dissuade inmate labor from being used purely for its financial incentive, and it would even work to eliminate the unfair competition for civilian wildland firefighting jobs (Weill, 2020). Secondly, grade work should be reassessed for its exploitative nature and only assignments offering clear vocational benefits to the worker should be permitted, rather than using residents for cheap manual labor. Lastly, the laws adopted in California allowing for record expungement and career training are a great step forward, so it is important that other states relying on inmate fire crews, like Arizona, adopt similar laws to allow former carceral residents a pathway into a firefighting career, which serves to benefit the individual, community, and the state.

These fire camps are often highly regarded by the residents and the process of getting into one can be pretty competitive (Goodman, 2014). This leads some to question how exploitative they really are. After all, there are a lot of things going for these camps. The meals prepared for the fire crews are high quality and far surpass anything found within a walled prison, they are surrounded by scenic landscapes and a notable absence of prison walls, plus family visitations are easier there than in traditional prison, despite the remote placement of the camps (Goodman, 2010). Additionally, the wages made firefighting are typically better than what one could find in any job within the walled prisons. While all of this is true, it is important to note that these are only benefits because the alternative is so dire, and these camps are still exploitative in nature (Weill, 2020). When walled prisons have limited job opportunities, greater threats of violence, and a worse physical setting, people are willing to subject themselves to exploitative conditions for a comparatively better environment.

The worsening fires are increasing our need for wildland firefighters. In response, states which use inmate firefighters should follow California's lead in creating a pathway for formerly incarcerated firefighters to continue their work as free citizens (cdcr.ca.gov). It is also important that states make improvements to their programs, including better training, pay, and more useful work assignments to protect their residents and set them up for future success.

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