

California State Prison - Eel River Fire Camp #31

From Incarceration to Firefighting: Pathways to Second Chances

Released July 16th, 2025



SUMMARY

Rehabilitation is the cornerstone of the Eel River Fire Conservation Camp #31's objective.

Eel River Fire Camp fulfills not only its primary mission providing incarcerated hand crews for fire suppression. Camp residents also provide services for conservation projects such as salmon restoration and preparing wood for the local senior center. During the Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury visit, there was a definite sense of pride in the camp and the accomplishments by both staff and inmates. The entire camp was impressively and extensively cleared of all flammable vegetation surrounding all structures for fire protection. There is a sense of normalcy and everyday living in the camp. People were working in the greenhouse, in the kitchen baking and cleaning, making repairs in the dormitories, working out in the weight room, watching television and working on a camp challenge to build a catapult.

The staff develops rapport with the inmates as the first step in achieving a rehabilitative objective. Because they spend so much time together, staff and inmates develop a relationship and build trust with one another. Personnel learn to read the inmates and can tell when there is something "off." This allows staff to address any issues before they become serious problems.

Inmates must meet stringent and rigorous physical requirements before training to become firefighters. After completing their training, inmates perform these services throughout northern California on supervised fire crews. Those who cannot meet the requirements to serve on a fire crew perform other duties within the camp. To further a sense of pride and ownership in the camp and promote sustainability, inmates grow fruits and vegetables and gather eggs from the chicken coop for meals. Preparing the food and baking goods is also part of the inmates' camp routine. Most camp repairs, roofing, or construction is completed by the inmates, as the Grand Jury observed while visiting the camp. Inmates value and appreciate the opportunity to work in the camp instead of being incarcerated in prison. They develop pride and ownership of the work

done, which further incentivizes positive behavior. Staff rarely encounters significant behavioral issues with inmates.

Staff and inmates collaborate to build a positive community that provides wildfire fighting, conservation, and community service. The staff's dedication to providing opportunities for the inmates working toward rehabilitation is commendable. Staff are assessing the feasibility of an inmate dog training Program that would rescue dogs from shelters and pair them with inmates for socialization and training. The program could help inmates gain skills and emotional growth, while also providing dogs with a second chance. The camp instills a sense of responsibility, teamwork, purpose, and pride in both the inmates and staff. Inmates are given a second chance and an opportunity to find employment after release. A recent California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation study found that incarcerated people who participate in correctional education and rehabilitative programs have a lower recidivism rate than inmates who do not participate in any programs.

BACKGROUND

The primary purpose of a Conservation Fire Camp is to support State, local and federal government agencies in responding to emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural disasters. They are cooperatively run by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). There are 35 conservation camps across California. These camps are minimum-security facilities run by correctional officers.

Eel River Conservation Camp #31 officially opened in February of 1967. The camp is spread over 168 acres of land and is the largest conservation camp in the system. The CDCR and CAL FIRE offices are in the same administrative building. The camp is a major warehousing and distribution center for firefighting-related supplies and equipment for the northern California area. It also includes a lumber mill, a warehouse, a mobile kitchen unit, a helicopter landing pad, dormitories, a green house, a library, hobby rooms, a television center, a baseball diamond, and a visitation area.

To be eligible to serve their prison sentence in a Conservation Fire Camp Program, an incarcerated individual must meet certain criteria. No inmate can be involuntarily assigned to the program. Inmate acceptance is based upon good behavior, ability to follow the rules, and participation in rehabilitation programs. CDCR staff must clear participants as physically and medically qualified for training. Volunteering inmates that qualify must have no prior serious or violent felonies or gang affiliations. An additional qualifying requirement is that inmates have more than ten months but fewer than eight years remaining on their sentence.

The camp operates under an honor system. It is open, with no fences or any other physical barriers to keep inmates inside the camp. Instead, there are simple camp boundary signs posted approximately every 40 feet around the main part of the camp. Inmates know that going beyond these signs is a violation of the rules that will result in a return to prison. This consequence provides inmates an opportunity to learn self-restraint and self-control.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury performed online research, reviewed documents, conducted a site visit, and interviewed people familiar with the Eel River Fire Conservation Camp #31.

DISCUSSION

Staffing

Present staffing at the camp is sufficient to meet the needs of the 60 inmates. Although the inmate population has been at this level for a while, the actual capacity is 132. Increasing the number of inmates would require an increase in staff, which would not be easy. Recruiting staff is challenging due to the remote location of the camp and the dire need for proper staff housing. The absence of adequate housing results in some staff members living in their own travel trailers or recreation vehicles.

Facilities

During the site visit of the Eel River Conservation Fire Camp #31, the Grand Jury made the following observations about the facilities:

- The inmates' dormitory was clean, in good repair, and has plenty of sunlight. A small individual space with a desk surface and lockers is provided for pairs of inmates.
- The dormitory has a new roof.
(Roof replacement was a prior Grand Jury recommendation)
- All facilities in the camp are open for inmate use from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.
- Bright murals and handmade carved signs are prominently displayed between the kitchen and dining area.



- The dining quarters were in good condition, spacious, and bright.
- A large chicken coop and enclosed area with chickens is located near the greenhouse. During the most productive time of the year, the chickens provide all the eggs the camp needs.
- A large greenhouse with a newly installed cover provides fresh fruit and vegetables for the camp. Fruit trees are donated by a garden shop in Eureka. All labor is provided by inmates with an interest in gardening.
- A room used for religious services and music appreciation sessions was newly painted and updated.
- The hobby room was newly painted and was in the process of being reorganized.
- The weight room had new mats, and all equipment was in working order.
(Equipment repair was a prior Grand Jury recommendation)
- TV/Library/Pool rooms were clean, organized, and well-maintained.
- A well-kept handball court, basketball, track, and baseball diamond provide sporting activities.
- There is an outdoor barbecue area with tables where inmates enjoy time with their families or visitors. There are provisions for conjugal visits for inmates.
- Although the warehouse and safety equipment had recently been inspected by the State Fire Marshall, we did see one fire extinguisher that had just become outdated.
- There is only one small staff housing unit and it needs repairs and updating; most of the staff are living in their own trailers or recreational vehicles.

An ongoing problem is easy access to illicit substances due to public access to the neighboring waste disposal site, coupled with the intentional lack of physical barriers at the adjacent camp boundary. Staff conducts periodic sweeps using drug-sniffing dogs. Staff stated that the incentive to be at the camp with its opportunities and freedoms, rather than being sent back to prison, minimizes this kind of activity.

Training

Firefighting is strenuous work. Inmates who want to be firefighters engage in rigorous physical endurance training in high-temperature weather to build stamina. For example, they do four-mile-long hikes in full gear up steep hillsides while surrounded by thick underbrush with poison oak. The inmates are instructed in prevention and treatment of poison oak and disinfection of their equipment.

Rehabilitation/Recidivism

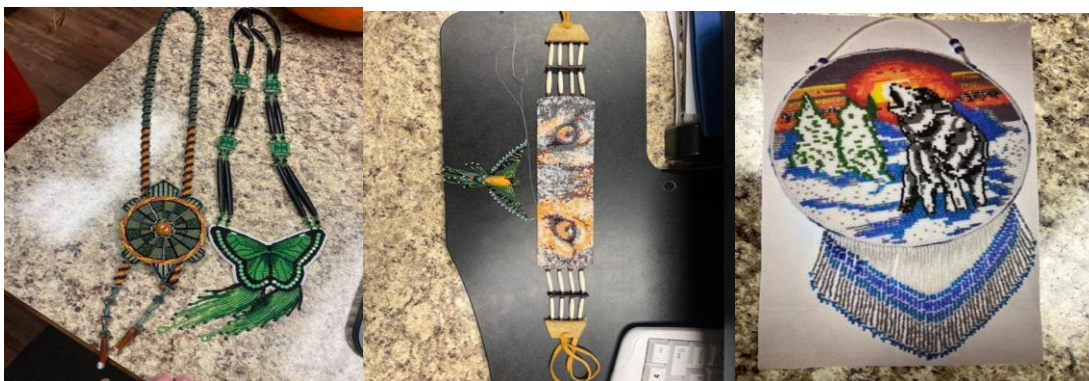
Lowering the recidivism rate is another objective of State prison fire camps. The “First Step” Law of 2018 created a system where some incarcerated individuals can earn time credits for participating in recidivism reduction programs and other productive activities. Fire camp

inmates have double the incentive for fighting fires. For every day they serve fighting fires, an inmate's sentence is reduced by two days.

Although there are no recidivism statistics specifically for Eel River Camp #31, the CDCR Recidivism Statewide Report cites a 25% recidivism rate for inmates participating for at least a year in special rehabilitative programs such as fire camps. The recidivism rate for incarcerated individuals who do not participate in any type of credit program is 44%.¹

The camp offers a GED (General Educational Development) program, and inmates can take College of the Redwoods courses towards earning an associate degree. Inmates can receive vocational training in construction, gardening, and culinary arts. Successful completion of educational courses and training earns merit credits towards reduction of their prison sentence. Programs to help inmates overcome alcohol or drug addictions can also earn merit credits.

The opportunity to learn something new is readily available to all inmates. Camp staff work to accommodate the interests of the inmates by researching information and material needs relative to that interest. Other support activities include, music appreciation, hobby crafts, woodworking, and leisure activities. Beading skills are currently being taught by an inmate.



Staff would like to start an inmate dog training program in collaboration with animal rescue organizations. This program would rescue dogs from shelters and pair them with inmates for socialization and training. The project could help inmates gain skills and emotional growth, while also providing dogs with a second chance.

Fire Conservation Camps provide participants the opportunity to earn a specified list of certifications related to firefighting, or the department's equivalents of those certifications, while incarcerated. When AB 2147 became a law, it provided a way for inmate firefighters to pursue careers in firefighting and related fields.² Staff report that some inmates have jobs lined up when they finish their time at the camp.

¹ CDCR Recidivism Report

<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2025/04/02/latest-cdcr-recidivism-report-highlights-decline-in-recidivism-and-value-of-rehabilitative-programming/>

² Expedited expungement for former fire crew members

https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/fire_camp_expungement/

Budget

The camp budget has three components:

- The inmate budget is based strictly on the number of inmates. This budget rises as the inmate count rises.
- The staff budget is based partially on the actual number of inmates. The first budget piece is funding to cover the fixed cost of keeping the camp fully operational (regardless of the number of inmates). The second piece is variable funding based on the actual inmate count.
- Supplemental funding can vary greatly from year to year. It is based upon the number of hours the camp crew spent fighting fires in the prior year. This extra allowance is used to enhance or upgrade facilities and programs.

Medical Care/Support

Medical care for inmates is readily available in the camp and in the field when fighting fires. All CAL FIRE firefighters are trained EMTs, and there are always at least four on duty in the camp. All CDCR staff are also trained in basic emergency medical care (including CPR) and are available to assist inmates in a medical emergency in camp or in the field. All active fire camp sites have a tent housing a mobile medical unit called a Medical Emergency Response Team. An ambulance and EMTs are present at all fire camp sites. The most frequent medical emergency at a fire is dehydration caused by a combination of high atmospheric temperatures and the intense heat of the fire itself.

FINDINGS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

F1: The Eel River Fire Conservation Camp is well-maintained by both staff and inmates. This supports the mission and function of the camp.

F2: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Eel River Fire Conservation Camp provide opportunities for inmates to obtain training, enhance skills, and advance their education. This lowers the recidivism rate.

F3: Due to the remoteness of the location, and inadequate staff housing, it is difficult for the Eel River Fire Conservation Camp to hire and retain staff. **(R1)**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1: Additional permanent staff housing be constructed to provide housing for current and future staff. This is to be completed by June 30, 2026. **(F3)**

Funding Recommendation: The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation fund the expenses listed in **R1** with appropriations from the next fiscal year. If those appropriations are not sufficient, the Grand Jury recommends that the State pursue donations from Humboldt county lumber companies and other businesses to help offset building costs.

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 entities or individuals to respond.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations
(All findings, all recommendations)

Responses are to be sent to:

The Honorable Judge Kelly L. Neel
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.