

# EL DORADO COUNTY 2021–2022 GRAND JURY

## GROWLERSBURG CONSERVATION CAMP INSPECTION REPORT

Case 21-07 – June 13, 2022

### **SUMMARY**

Each year, the Grand Jury in each county is mandated by California Penal Code (PC) Section 919(b) to “inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.” The term “public prisons” was recently clarified in a California Attorney General (AG) opinion (No. 18-103) dated March 10, 2022. The AG opined that the term “public prisons” in PC Section 919(b) includes “local detention facilities,” that confine prisoners for more than 24 hours. A county or city jail is a typical example of such a local detention facility. The AG concluded that each Grand Jury must inquire into the “local detention facilities” located within its county.

### **BACKGROUND**

The primary mission of the Conservation Camp Program is to support State, local, and Federal government agencies that respond to emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural or man-made disasters.

The Conservation Camp Program was initiated by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to provide able-bodied inmates the opportunity to work on meaningful projects throughout the State. These camps were established in 1915. During World War II, much of the work force that was used by the Division of Forestry, now known as the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), was depleted because their service was required for the war effort.

CDCR provided the needed work force by having inmates occupy “temporary camps” to augment the regular firefighting forces. There were 41 “interim camps” during WWII, which were the foundation for the network of camps in operation today. In 1946, the Rainbow Conservation Camp in Fallbrook, CA was opened as the first permanent male conservation camp. Rainbow Conservation Camp made history again when it was converted to a female camp in 1983.

As of May 2021, there were approximately 1,600 inmates working at fire camps in California. Approximately 900 of those inmates are fire-line qualified. All incarcerated

firefighters receive a week of classroom instruction and a week of field exercise training. In addition, CAL FIRE staff provides 29 hours of classroom instruction, known as Forestry Firefighter Training. The California Corrections Center in Susanville serves as the primary hub for training and placing inmates in Northern California conservation camps. Female inmates are trained at the California Institution for Women in Corona, and youth offenders are trained at the Pine Grove Conservation Camp.

In September 2020, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill (AB) 2147, which provides an expedited expungement pathway (process of sealing arrest and conviction records) for formerly incarcerated individuals who have successfully participated as firefighters in the State's Conservation Camp Program. Under AB 2147, a person who served as an incarcerated fire-fighting crew member is eligible to apply for an expungement upon release from custody. If the expungement is approved, the individual can seek various careers, including those that require a state license. Successful participation in a fire-fighting crew is determined by CDCR for those who were incarcerated in State prisons.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Site Visit:**

- Inspection of Growlersburg Conservation Camp #33 (Growlersburg) conducted on March 9, 2022.

### **Documents Reviewed:**

- Prior El Dorado County Grand Jury Reports;
- California Grand Jury Association Guidelines on Reporting on Jails and Prisons;
- California Grand Jury Association Detention Facility Inspection Form;
- Board of State and Community Corrections *Jails Inspection Handbook for Grand Jurors; and*
- CDCR Conservation (Fire) Camps Website.

### **Interviewed:**

- CDCR staff; and

- CAL FIRE staff

## **DISCUSSION**

Growlersburg began operations in 1967 and is one of 35 such camps still in operation in California. The camp is located on 80 acres, approximately 1.5 miles north of Georgetown in El Dorado County, between the cities of Placerville and Auburn.

Growlersburg initially housed 80 inmates. The dormitory building was increased in capacity by nearly 40 percent in 1980, to house 132 inmates. The inmate population at the time of this inspection was 74 male adults. Current personnel consist of 11 CDCR staff and 14 CAL FIRE staff.

The facility is well maintained. The camp has plans for a complete remodel, pending State funding approval. The facility has a family-friendly area for inmates' families to visit on the weekends. Inmates have access to an arts and craft area, library, and physical fitness area.

CDCR is responsible for the selection, supervision, and discipline of the inmates at Growlersburg. Inmates are directly supervised 24 hours a day while on work projects and assigned to emergencies. CAL FIRE maintains the camp, supervises the work of the inmate fire crews and is responsible for inmate custody while on daily projects and fire assignments. CDCR staff often accompany inmate fire crews on out-of-county assignments and on local assignments located near residential areas. Growlersburg has an 18-wheel mobile kitchen for use at fire sites which is operated by the inmates and can provide up to 5,000 meals per day.

An inmate must volunteer for the fire camp program; no one is involuntarily assigned to work in a fire camp. Inmates who volunteer must have "minimum custody" status under the CDCR system, which is the lowest classification for inmates. This classification is based on the inmate's sustained good behavior in prison, conforming with the rules, and participating in rehabilitative programming. Some convictions automatically make an inmate ineligible for conservation camp assignment, even if the inmate has a minimum custody status. Those convictions include sexual offenses, arson, and any history of escape using force or violence.

No fences or guard towers surround the facility. Growlersburg's discipline system is based on the type of infraction committed by the inmate. For less serious infractions, time may be added to the inmate's sentences or privileges removed. Serious infractions may result in the inmate being removed from the camp and returned to an institution. Mandatory inmate counts are done numerous times during the day. However, some inmates have escaped, with the most recent occurring in July 2021.

In addition to fighting fires, inmates can also work as support staff for the camp. They also manage kitchen and laundry services, as well as perform most repairs and maintenance required for the wastewater treatment, buildings, vehicles, and tools. The facility has an on-site garden, which provides food for the inmates. Inmates receive instruction, learning skills in carpentry, mechanics, lumber milling, and wastewater treatment.

Inmates can also be assigned to assist the community by responding to rescue efforts in local parks, and they are available to perform flood suppression activities. The camp has two mobile sawmills that produce stock to build picnic tables that are sold to a variety of public agencies.

Also, Growlersburg provides labor for various community service projects such as:

- Construction of shaded fuel breaks for wildland fire safety;
- Construction of hiking and biking trails;
- General maintenance and grounds care for community parks, community service districts, schools, CAL FIRE, and local fire district facilities;
- Landscaping, cleaning, and grooming of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park Museum in Coloma; and
- Assisting the University of California, Berkeley's Blodgett Research Forest in implementing various vegetation management-based research projects.

Inmates receive an enhanced reduction in their sentences based on time served in the camp, and those assigned to any incident receive fire pay.

The Conservation Camp Program is an important part of the rehabilitation of inmates, as they are performing a vital service and giving back to the community. Just as in every CDCR facility, every fire camp offers rehabilitative and education services. CDCR and CAL FIRE staff shared examples of inmates' successful transition to productive employment upon release.

## **EVALUATION**

We found the inmate programs and opportunities available at Growlersburg to be excellent and well managed. Therefore, this Grand Jury has no recommendations. We also feel that these camps are to be commended for what they offer for life outside the prisons for inmates.

## **REQUESTS FOR RESPONSE**

Responses to this report are not required nor requested.