



CONSERVATION
legacy

**CONSERVATION LEGACY
VETERANS FIRE CORPS
US FOREST SERVICE
2017 REPORT**



**21ST CENTURY
CONSERVATION
SERVICE CORPS**



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS | VETERANS FIRE CORPS



The VFC is a collaborative initiative of Conservation Legacy, run in partnership with state and federal agencies including the USDA Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and AmeriCorps. The VFC aims to engage recent era Veterans on priority hazardous fuels projects while developing the next generation of wildland firefighters.

Veterans Fire Corps programs can offer an important bridge to civilian life and job skills, but also a way for veterans and their families to engage more with the outdoors, recreation, and America's public lands. The Veterans Fire Corps successfully addresses two needs: 1) veterans who need a way to transition from military to civilian life and service; and, 2) land management agencies who need highly qualified and well trained employees and key wildfire remediation projects accomplished. VFC builds upon the knowledge, leadership experience, and training of the women and men who served in the armed forces, refocusing their mission to protecting our public lands from the threat of wildfire.

IMPACT

Conservation Corps programs nationwide have engaged over 1,600 veterans total since 2009, through 19 separate Corps programs around the country. Since 2011, the California Conservation Corps, Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association have engaged over 1,000 Veterans in the Veterans Fire Corps. In 2017, Conservation Legacy programs served 45 veterans.

Veterans Fire Corps targets recent era Veterans, generally between the ages of 23-35. Veterans joining the program receive a living stipend, training, and support while working on projects varying in length from 12-weeks to six months. Training covers the key firefighting areas leading towards a Firefighter Type 2 certification. VFC crews are then mobilized on thinning projects, pile burning, prescribed burns, and, at times, initial fire attack. Federal agencies engage the VFC crews to complete hazardous fuels reduction projects as well as assist with prescribed burn assignments, direct fire response and disaster response. In many ways VFC provides veterans a short-term opportunity to test out their interest in wildland fire without having to make a long term commitment.

An ultimate goal of the VFC is to transition its graduates into employment as wildland firefighters, but VFC also encourage outdoor stewardship and enable veterans to gain the benefits of being outdoors for physical and mental health.

Studies engaged with the effectiveness and return-on-investment from Veterans Fire Corps programs and found the following outcomes:

88% of participants said the Veterans Fire Corps provided training and skills necessary for successful post program employment,

23% increase in sense of purpose amongst participants,

97% of Veterans Fire Corps members surveyed in 2017 indicated that the program assisted them in adjusting from military to civilian life, and

95% of Veterans Fire Corps members surveyed in 2017 indicated that the VFC prepared them for entry-level employment in wildland fire.

Conservation Legacy supported VFC members with the following post-program employment opportunities: wildland fire opportunities with various USFS crews, hotshots and engines, including the Silver City Hotshots, Blue Ridge Hotshots, Big Bend Engine, and Weaver Mountain Helitack. Participants also found employment with the Bureau of Land Management's Yuma Engine crew, in structural fire and with Conservation Legacy as returning VFC members and as full time staff. Conservation Legacy continues to support several 2017 VFC members who are still seeking employment in wildland fire related careers.



PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

The projects VFC crews complete are critical to forest and community health across the country. Wildfires continue to burn hotter, faster and more frequently. Fuels reduction, fire mitigation and prescribed burn assignments that VFC crews are tasked with are critical to insuring that, if a wildfire does burn, effects are mitigated. Project work is varied but primarily focused on forest fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, prescribed burn preparation and invasive species removal. The forest fuels reduction is the majority of the project work and is focused on treating high-density areas with heavy fuel loads. Veteran fire crews have reduced fire fuel loads that included Piñon, Juniper, Ponderosa, and Oak on public lands through Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.

VFC impacts the Veterans engaged with VFC as well as communities where VFC crews operate. VFC helps Veterans transition from military service to equally meaningful civilian service in a structured, safe and impactful way. The transition is facilitated by completing critical work in local communities which is protecting people, property and resources from the threat of catastrophic wildfire. The impact of the program can be seen in the stories of veterans who have been impacted through VFC participation:

Project sponsors consistently express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of work and productivity of Corps. Virtually all federal project partners (99.6%) say they would work with Corps again.

2017 VETERANS FIRE CORPS: BY THE NUMBERS

45 Total Current Era Veterans Served

40 Alumni placed in or seeking relevant post-service employment

152 Miles treated or improved, including firebreak created

7,155 Acres improved, including Rx burns

61,210 Project work hours completed



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS | VETERANS FIRE CORPS

Southwest Conservation Corps Pike San Isabel National Forest

Southwest Conservation Corps' Los Valles Veteran Fire Corps (VFC) had one of the most successful seasons to date in 2017. The VFC crew spent the majority of their season working on a high priority fuel break project in the Salida Ranger District's Cree Creek area. Their hard work resulted in the project being completed ahead of schedule with 39 acres cleared and 471 slash piles created. In the fall, the crew was able to assist in the prescribed burn of over 445 acres of the Shavano Burn unit. These projects contribute greatly to mitigating the impacts of wildfire on the forest and neighboring communities.

Crew members completed training and worked closely with USFS personnel and crews throughout the season. This allowed them to develop close relationships directly within the USFS and gain additional professional development throughout the season. Members received multiple trainings including S-130/190 Firefighter Type 1, S-212 Wildland Fire Chainsaw, S-131 Firefighter Type 2, S-270 Basic Air Operations, and S-211 Portable Pumps. The combination of training and on the ground experience positions crew members to be competitive to firefighting positions with federal agencies and other land management positions upon completion of the program.

Crew Member Kyle Stolk said of his experience: "My perspective of land management has broadened vastly thus far working with the Veterans Fire Corps. I understand now how cutting trees can greatly benefit the health of a forest and the immense amount of work it takes to manage just a small amount of land." The Pike San Isabel National Forest considered this season a great success with high retention rates, quality work completed, and positive crew development throughout the season.



Southwest Conservation Corps Grand Mesa Uncompahgre Gunnison National Forest

The Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) and the GMUG NF have a very strong working relationship that continues to increase the quality of the Veterans Fire Corps (VFC) program that SCC offers. Dan Huisjen, Fuels Specialist on the GMUG NF, is one of the most supportive partners that SCC works with; consequently Dan also expects the most from SCC and the VFC crew each year as well. In 2017, the VFC crew benefited by spending time on at least five separate areas of the Forest, completing a diversity of projects and meeting making many fire manager contact for future job prospects as a result. The crew completed fireline, thinned fuels, collected fence materials, completed some trail work and spent 14 days on a fire assignment to California. Specifically, the crew worked 3940 hours cutting about 21 miles of fireline, preparing the GMUG NF to burn thousands of acres with prescribed burns in the future. The crew also thinned about 180 acres

"The leadership was very good and they were able to obtain a high level of performance from the crew. As usual, Kevin and Jordan at SCC have been great to work with; we are moving the VFC program on the GMUG forward every year. This year we got the crew out on a 14 day fire assignment as part of the Gunnison River Hand Crew."

The VFC crew set us up well to burn hundreds/thousands of acres with prescribed fire. They also thinned stands in key locations to reduce fuels and enhance stand health." said Dan Huisjen, Fuels Specialist for Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest.





“ We continuously have senior staff around to pick the brain of for our future employment in conservation and in the wild-land fire industry. I’m optimistic this program will open up many doors in my next chapters of the fire industry. I look forward to future endeavors, missions and good times with the VFC! I look forward to recommending the VFC program to all my Veteran battle buddies and look forward what the rest of the season has to offer.”

Angelo Apodaca *Veterans Fire Corps*
Crew Member

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS | VETERANS FIRE CORPS



Arizona Conservation Corps Lincoln National Forest

Arizona Conservation Corps, in partnership with the Lincoln National Forest, deployed a 450 hour Veterans Fire Corps crew to various districts from October to December, 2017.

The Veterans Fire Corps crew on the Lincoln National Forest was comprised of five crew members and two crew leaders. The crew leaders received a Wilderness First Responder and all Corps members completed a Wilderness First Aid training. Participants attended the Colorado Fire Camp for two weeks. With this training the crew completed hazardous fuels reduction projects within high priority Wildland Urban Interface areas. Hazardous fuels work included thinning vegetation, hand piling fuels, limbing and brushing vegetation and prescribed fire.

On the Lincoln National Forest the VFC crew completed a total of 2,255.75 hours of service. A total of 369.73 acres were improved by prescribed fire and fuels mitigation work. A total of 4.70 miles of fire line was constructed and 2.25 miles of fence line was maintained.



Southwest Conservation Corps On Assignment: Alex Davids

"This summer, Southwest Conservation Corps VFC Crew 471 had the unique opportunity to be called up on a fire assignment in California. The assignment started in Montrose, Colorado at the inter-agency dispatch center. This is where we met the crew, composed of firefighters from the Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and State, engine and helitack crews.

The roll started in Hayfork, California. This was a small Type IV incident that existed only to bring resources into the area for presumed dry lightning starts. Our crew sat around ICP for two days waiting. The third day we got an assignment to mop up the eastern perimeter of the picket fire. That day was a good learning experience for everyone. Our crew was familiarized with mop up procedures and the steep terrain of Northern California.

There were single resource Pro Fallers on the fire as well, all day they were tippin' 6ft+ Dbh. There are some very big trees on the west coast. Very cool to see! The next morning we headed back to Redding, California for our next assignment. From there we were sent to Happy Camp in the Klamath National Forest.

There were a couple of fires in the area that had the potential to grow large fast. When we arrived there was a small Type III incident management team, in just a few days it turned into a very large Type II incident called the Eclipse Complex. We were one of the first crews there.

The Happy Camp area is infamous to firefighters. The extremely steep terrain, dry summers, and coastal driven weather make fire a regular occurrence. The inversion is like clockwork. Every night the smoke gets trapped in the deep valleys, smoke can stay in the area for months.

Our first assignment was road prep. There were roads accessing ridge tops above the main fire. These roads were being used as contingency line. So we prepped roads for three days, removing ladder fuels to a depth of 30 ft and swamping all fuels to the uphill side of the road. The 30ft depth was all extremely thick and steep. We shined during these first few days due to our amount of trigger time on labor intensive projects all season. Most of the entry level firefighters had nowhere near as much experience as us.

The division decided to burn off our prepped roads. We were asked to hold our line as the Tallac Hotshots out of Tahoe burned south along the road to a ridge line. Meanwhile Beckwourth Hotshots burned roads heading northwest from our position. The goal of that day was to burn out the ridges above the fire to create solid black and prevent spotting to the backside of the mountain. After fire was put on the ridgetops, the main fire seemed to suck all of the heat from the top of the bowl down to the bottom. This caused extreme fire behavior, but the winds were in our favor and everything went according to the plan. The entire bowl was completely black in only a few hours. There was no torching on the line that we prepped.

The rest of the roll was basically mopping up the boundaries of this burn out and holding lines under similar circumstances. The roll seemed to fly by. The whole crew enjoyed the experience very much, and everyone preformed very well. This experience was the best ending to a season I can imagine for this program. Experiencing real wildfire, real schedule, workload and hazardous conditions of a firefighter is extremely important.



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CONCLUSION

Conservation Legacy is extremely enthusiastic about the opportunity to continue and grow its partnership with the US Forest service to expand opportunities for young people and veterans to serve on public lands and to provide much needed services in the areas of land restoration, trail maintenance and construction, vegetation management, historic preservation, wildfire prevention, community development and other critical areas.

Participation in corps programming has a long track record of success and results in young people developing professional and life skills as well as an increased awareness of environmental and resource stewardship. These activities promote the mission and vision to which both the US Forest Service and Conservation Legacy are committed.

The physical and financial support from the USFS, interns, crews, communities, partner agencies, staff and partner conservation corps in this effort have been remarkable. Conservation Legacy is humbled to continue to learn and grow together and to continue to provide systems, administrative and coordinating services that can build capacity at the local level to engage youth and young adults with public lands, for the betterment of our shared future.