



2023-24 GRAND JURY REPORT  
EL DORADO COUNTY  
FEBRUARY 28, 2024, CASE #24-02

## GROWLERSBURG CONSERVATION CAMP INSPECTION

*This report focuses on the Growlersburg Conservation Camp #33 in Georgetown, California, operated by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and CAL FIRE.*

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# SUMMARY

## 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 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.

This report focuses on the Growlersburg Conservation Camp #33 in Georgetown, California, operated by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

Overall, the facility was a good example for a rehabilitation center, and the CDCR inmates seemed happy in their surroundings. We feel that Growlersburg is to be commended for what they offer for life and rehabilitation outside typical prisons for inmates. However, we identified a few areas for improvement:

There are no medical staff on site. The lack of access to the Marshall Medical Clinic (a few miles away) forces them to take ill or injured inmates to Jamestown (5-hour roundtrip), negatively impacting staff coverage.

Funding of the facility can be difficult. If the fire season is slow (no fires to fight), no funding is available for the CDCR. The CDCR and CAL FIRE should work with the state government to change the rules for rehabilitation funding.

# BACKGROUND

## Background

The Conservation Camp Program was established in 1915 by the California State Detentions Bureau, now known as the CDCR, to provide able-bodied inmates with the opportunity to work on meaningful projects throughout the State. During World War II, much of the work force that was used by the Division of Forestry, now known as CAL FIRE, was depleted because their services were required for the war effort.

The CDCR provided the needed workforce 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.

All incarcerated Growlersburg Conservation Camp 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. 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 the CDCR for those who were incarcerated in State prisons.

# METHODOLOGY

## Methodology

### **Site Visit:**

Inspection of Growlersburg Conservation Camp #33 was conducted on October 26, 2023.

### **Documents Reviewed:**

- Prior El Dorado County Grand Jury Growlersburg Inspection Reports (2021, 2022)
- 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
- CDCR Conservation (Fire) Camps Website.

### **Interviewed:**

- CDCR staff
- CAL FIRE staff
- Inmates

# DISCUSSION

## 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 79 male adults (no juveniles or females). Current personnel consist of 11 CDCR staff and 14 CAL FIRE staff. During our inspection, our primary points of contact were the CDCR Lieutenant and the CAL FIRE Captain.

The inspection began outside of the main office building that houses the leadership for both the CDCR and CAL FIRE. The grounds were clean, and the buildings were in good condition. We saw no indication of lack of maintenance on the exterior or interior of the buildings. The facility has a family-friendly area just outside of the main office area for inmates' families to visit on the weekends and four holidays during the year.

The first stop after the initial inspection outside the office and the family visitation area was the Wood Shop. The shop was clean and in good condition. The only comment/concern by the CDCR Lieutenant was that they no longer had qualified individuals to truly utilize the Wood Shop effectively. The next stop was the Truck Shop where several CDCR staff were busy working on a CAL FIRE vehicle. From there we went to visit the small Engine Shop (chainsaws, weed whackers, etc.), and the Sawmill. All the areas were clean and in good condition.

The next stop was the kitchen. The kitchen (built in 1967) was clean with a handful of CDCR staff working at the time we inspected it. The next inspection area was the sleeping/resting areas, bathrooms, and the showers. All were in good condition with only the observation that the mattresses in the sleeping areas appeared to be old. From there we inspected the hobby

## DISCUSSION

room, the chicken coop, and the vegetable garden. Again, all were in good condition, including the new chicken coop still under construction. As an interesting footnote, the existing chickens (118) produce approximately 150 eggs per day and save thousands of dollars annually in the food cost budget while providing excellent protein for the staff and inmates. The new chicken coop will double the number of chickens. Inmates also have access to an arts and craft area, library, and physical fitness area.

During our continued dialog with CDCR staff, we learned that the CDCR is responsible for the selection, supervision, and discipline of the inmates (referred to as firefighters going forward) at Growlersburg. Firefighters 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 firefighter crews and is responsible for the firefighters' custody while on daily projects and fire assignments. The CDCR staff often accompany firefighter 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 firefighters and can provide up to 5,000 meals per day.

An inmate must volunteer for the fire camp program. 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 programs. 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.

There are no fences or guard towers surrounding the Growlersburg 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 removal of the inmate from the camp and returned to an institution. Mandatory inmate counts are done numerous times per day (at least every 2 hours

## DISCUSSION

and an occasional surprise count). Although there have been few escapes from the facility over the past decade, they have had a couple in 2021-2023. All were recaptured and returned to the appropriate facility.

In addition to fighting fires, inmates can/do 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 (again, reducing overall food costs to operate the facility).

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
- Assisting the University of California, Berkeley's Blodgett Research Forest in implementing various vegetation management-based research projects

Camp firefighters receive an enhanced reduction in their sentences based on time served in the camp, and those assigned to any fire incident receive fire pay. The average time spent at the camp is 18 to 36 months.

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. The CDCR leadership was concerned that they would not qualify for rehabilitation funding under current California law, which surprised the Grand Jury members performing the inspection.



## DISCUSSION

Overall, the facility was a good example for a rehabilitation center and the CDCR inmates seemed happy in their surroundings. Growlersburg is to be commended for what they offer for life and rehabilitation outside typical prisons for inmates. However, the inspection team identified a few areas that may be worth following up by the CDCR and CAL FIRE to improve the overall environment of the Growlersburg facility.

- There are no medical staff at the CDCR facility in Growlersburg. The lack of access to the Marshall Medical Clinic (a few miles away) forces them to take injured inmates to Jamestown (5-hour roundtrip) causing a negative impact on CDCR staffing.
- Funding the Growlersburg facility can be difficult at times. If the fire season is slow (no fires to fight), no funding is available for the CDCR.
- Under current California rules, the CDCR does not qualify for rehabilitation funding. This facility is a good example of a rehabilitation facility, and the State government may want to look at providing rehabilitation funding for Growlersburg.
- The mattresses in the sleeping quarters appear to be worn out. The CDCR may want to look at the existing sleeping accommodations to determine if some of the mattresses should be replaced.

Responses to this report are not required or requested.