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VETERANS FIRE CORPS HELPS VETS TRANSITION INTO THE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE



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The Veterans Fire Corps is a collaborative initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), Veterans Green Jobs, and various conservation corps that engage recent-era veterans on priority hazardous fuels projects. The program builds upon the knowledge, leadership, experience, and training of military veterans, retraining them and refocusing their mission to protect our public lands from the threat of wildfire. The conservation corps that operate Veterans Fire Corps programs recruit, hire, and train the crews and provide insurance, tools, and gear. Federal agencies (from USDA or DOI) provide funding, help with training, and coordinate fire assignments and interaction with local agency crews.

Brief History

The Veterans Fire Corps program has been referred to as the “minor league hot shots” for Federal wildland firefighting. In 2009, the Southwest Conservation Corps partnered with Veterans Green Jobs to launch a series of Veterans Green Corps programs intended to help veterans (primarily those recently returning from Iraq and Afghanistan) transition to civilian

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life by leveraging their military leadership experience to meet pressing conservation needs on public lands. From 2009 to 2011, the Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, awarded the Southwest Conservation Corps, in partnership with Veterans Green Jobs,

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more than \$900,000 to operate 13 Veterans Green Corps crews, providing jobs to more than 100 veterans. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) followed suit in 2010 with awards of \$350,000 for fuels mitigation work in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico.

It quickly became evident that there was a strong match between veterans looking for post-military job opportunities and the employment needs in fuels mitigation and wildland firefighting. In addition to providing training and jobs for

veterans, these programs helped local land managers meet their yearly quotas for acres thinned and treated. Initial corps projects were split between fuels mitigation, trail maintenance, and construction. Although all the projects were successful, the highest priorities were identified as fuels mitigation and the retention of veterans on these crews.

In the summer of 2010, the Southwest Conservation Corps, in partnership with San Juan Public Lands (Forest Service and BLM) and Shawna Legarza, Columbine District fire management officer, piloted a Veterans Fire Corps program that trained and prepared veterans specifically for future opportunities as wildland firefighters. Veterans enrolled in the program received all the mandatory training and equipment to become certified as type 2 wildland firefighters. They worked on thinning projects, pile-burning projects, and prescribed burns. The local fire managers, led by Legarza, quickly realized the value of having this extra help on the forest and the potential for the participants to become strong candidates for future positions as Federal wildland firefighters.

The Current Program

In 2011, the Forest Service allocated \$1.5 million to expand the Veterans Fire Corps program to a national demonstration project. Demonstration projects will occur in the Forest Service Rocky

a critical component for veteran training and development. It was equally important for the current Federal employees, as they were able to recognize the high levels of ability and competence of the veterans working next to them. These interactions were incredibly important in the hiring process of the Veterans Fire Corps participants for 2011 positions on San Juan Public Lands and helped the pilot program participants gain employment on local fire squads for the upcoming fire season. This interaction between participants and land management agency partners will be critical to the continued success of the program.

The Participants

To date, there have only been two female participants in the program; however, the program actively recruits males and females. Participants receive a small living stipend while in the program, but it is generally not enough to support more than one person. Thus, the most successful participants do not enter the program with any significant family or financial commitments.

The veterans have a strong connection to each other. During their military service, these men and women may have served in different places, but they all understand each other. This understanding allows the crew to coalesce into an efficient working team and helps form a bond of trust formulated by past experience. “We ‘get’ each other,” said Mike Bremer, a member of the Veterans Fire Corps. His words are often echoed by other participants. “Vets speak a common language,” said Tony Lagouranis. “They are given a responsibility and they do it.”



A Veterans Fire Corps member looks on during a prescribed burn assignment. San Juan National Forest, 2010.

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Lagouranis also addressed a more serious issue shared by his crew members. “Most combat vets have problems,” he said bluntly, “and being with other vets helps.” It is this connection that kept one former Marine Corps sniper in the program. He had a six-figure job offer in the oil drilling industry but chose to join the Veterans Green Corps program in 2009. He spent the summer working on trails for \$300 a week because he realized that his anxiety around post-traumatic stress seemed to fade the longer he spent living with his “comrades” among trees and streams.

The Summary and Future

The Veterans Fire Corps program provides training opportunities for reentry into civilian life while completing important project work on our public lands. The program promotes veteran employment, builds future fire management leaders, and accomplishes priority hazardous fuels mitigation.

Looking forward, there are many veterans who will be looking to find meaningful employment in the civilian sector to find a new way to serve our country. The Veterans

Mountain, Southwest, and Pacific Southwest (California) regions. These regions will partner with the Southwest Conservation Corps, the Student Conservation Association, and the California Conservation Corps to accomplish priority projects and train veterans via Veterans Fire Corps programs.

The Need

The Veterans Fire Corps addresses two major issues currently facing public land management agencies: (1) the need for highly qualified and well-trained future employees and (2) the need for additional resources to complete priority hazardous fuels projects.

The program helps land management agencies meet the 2009 Presidential Executive Order that directed agencies to assist veterans in securing employment and helping with their re-entry into civilian life. The program also meets the need for Federal agencies to hire employees with experience.



Tony Lagouranis, Veterans Fire Corps participant, lights fuels on a prescribed burn. San Juan National Forest, 2010.

In a recent example of a win-win situation resulting from the program, staff from the San Juan Public Lands realized they had a great opportunity to assess potential future employees after working closely with the Veterans Fire Corps participants on fuels projects on the forest. Managers encouraged the program participants to apply for jobs on their crews and engines and hired all qualified program graduates who wanted positions. The San Juan Public Lands staff were grateful to know that they were hiring trained, qualified squad members who were well adjusted to the nature of the work.

Transferring Military Experience to a Civilian Job

Veterans have served the country and sacrificed for others abroad; once they return stateside, they are looking for meaningful employment that fits their interests and backgrounds. For veterans who are interested in careers in the fire management industry, the Veterans Fire Corps program provides that training and opportunity.

Recent-era veterans have tremendous and varied experience; however, military training and experience does not always translate well into the civilian sector. Veterans need training to help enable a successful re-entry into civilian life, as evidenced by the backgrounds of past participants.

For example, as a former Army medic, Sarah Castinada jumped out of planes into drop zones with the 82nd Airborne. Tony Lagouranis served in difficult conditions as an Army interrogator in Iraq. Lew Sovocool was an officer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and

possesses technical skills attractive to employers, but will likely never replicate the level of responsibility he had as a program manager of a \$200 million Afghan Army infrastructure program. These people and other veterans can capitalize on their military experience and use it in their civilian work setting, but they must have the right guidance and training opportunities.

The Model

The Veterans Fire Corps firefighter leadership development program focuses on providing incrementally more challenging experiences for program participants. The curriculum, made up of three 12-week training tiers, was carefully designed to build upon established skills so no individual is put in a situation for which he or she is not prepared.

The first tier focuses on introductory fuels reduction work, leadership training, and minimum exposure to fire suppression. The two advanced tiers include increased levels of fire response, additional leadership training, higher level certifications, and additional time spent on fire-specific assignments with local fire crews. The tiered model allows for gradual exposure to challenging situations and allows individuals to self-select in or out of circumstances according to their comfort level.

One important component of the model is interaction between Federal land management agency staff and crews and the Veterans Fire Corps program. In the 2010 pilot program, the San Juan Public Lands Columbine District hand crew worked directly alongside the Veterans Fire Corps participants on thinning projects and a few pile-burning assignments. This was

Meet the Veterans Green Corps

Descriptions of the corps' experience as explained by past participants best describe the importance of the program:

Ross Schumacher: Lightwheel mechanic and combat water survival instructor in the U.S. Marine Corps, deployed twice to Iraq.

"The Veterans Fire Corps has helped me out in many ways. Since being hired on the crew in March 2010, I have obtained many classes that include S-130, S-190, S-212, S-211, S-131, S-133, I-700, S-290, L-180, and L-280. In addition to this, the contacts I have made throughout the wildland firefighting world have been outstanding. With the combination of all the classes, contacts, and [my tough stamina and perseverance], I have

landed a job on a fire engine for the upcoming season and plan on making wildland firefighting my career. I do owe a lot to the program and will forever be grateful for the time, effort, and money everyone at the Southwest Conservation Corps has put forth into our projects."

Lew Sovocool: Combat Engineer in the U.S. Army, deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan.

"I knew from experiences during college that I wanted to pursue work in the natural resources field after I separated from the Army, but I didn't know which track to follow. After being involved with the Veterans Green Corps/Veterans Fire Corps program for the last year, I now have the training, credentials, experience, and exposure to make a well-informed decision about which career to begin transitioning to.

"The majority of our project work was in fuels reduction/fire mitigation. I got really interested in how all of the many factors work together to influence the make-up and structure of our forests and how they have changed since people have moved in and began settling areas that had previously been left to natural influences. I've been researching graduate school programs and decided to work for a few years as a wildland firefighter to gain more on the ground experience. I'll be working on the handcrew for the Columbine District of the San Juan National Forest this season. The opportunities provided through the program opened my eyes to different careers within Federal land managing agencies and gave me the tools to successfully apply and get hired so that I can pursue those interests."

Fire Corps program helps these veterans redefine their mission here at home, retraining them to serve our public lands, communities, and each other. As public land management agencies look to complete priority projects, it is evident that the Veterans Fire Corps program can meet a variety of needs while providing a meaningful experience for all involved. The continued development and implementation of the Veterans Fire Corps vision—engaging and training veterans on meaningful projects while training them to replace an aging workforce—will leave a strong legacy for all involved. ■



Veteran Fire Corps members and Forest Service personnel pause for a picture on a prescribed burn assignment. San Juan National Forest, 2010.