

May 24, 2021

San Mateo County Board of Supervisors

Dear Supervisors

At our April 1 Parks Commission meeting, we discussed the use of California Department of Corrections work crews by San Mateo County for fire fuel reduction, and wildfire mitigation. We had an informative presentation and discussion with Cal-Fire Chief Gonzales regarding specifics of this program.

At this presentation, we heard that the program is popular with inmates and competitive; not all inmates who want to participate are allowed into the program. We heard that some of the reasons that the program is popular is as follows:

1. Prisoners prefer being away from prison.
2. Prisoners receive two days off their sentence for every day on the work crew.
3. Participants benefit by receive training in firefighting, as well as general employment skills.
4. Participation in the work crew makes parolees eligible for advanced training at the Ventura Training Center, which includes a \$1,905/month stipend, as well as support of Counselors from Anti-Recidivism

Coalition

(ARC)

4. Some participants benefit by being hired by Calfire at the end of their sentences, and some have had productive careers in firefighting.
6. Upon completion of the program the participants are eligible to request to have their records expunged.

Because of these above benefits, we strongly urge continued participation in this program.

There was concern, from the ACLU and others, that the published CDRC average payment of \$2.67/day for fighting wildfires is insufficient. Coming up with an appropriate level of compensation is complex. As David Fathi, of the ACLU National Prison Project states:

“It’s difficult to say with precision what a reasonable wage would be; obviously incarcerated workers are not in the same position as non-incarcerated workers because their living expenses are largely covered by the state.”

We encourage a dialogue with Cal-fire, and the California Department of Corrections, and appropriate State leaders regarding appropriate compensation for inmate labor, an ongoing issue that we assume would include the discussion of:

Living expenses

Training benefit to prisoners

Prisoner debts due to victim restitution

Child support due

Compensation for inmates injuries suffered on the job

We at the San Mateo County Parks Commission realize the value that these work crews add to the ongoing management of County Parks. We feel that SMC Parks could enhance the value of the work crews labor by making a special effort to hire appropriate graduates of this program. We support continuing this program, as well as encourage state level discussions about appropriate compensation.

Sincerely yours,

Neil Merrilees, Chair

San Mateo County Parks Commission