

## Veterans Clear Fire Break Near Country Estates as Part of CCC Crew

The California Conservation Corps and Forest Service offer young veterans job skills to help them transition into civilian careers.

- By [Julie Pendray](#) November 10, 2011

Veterans are working in California Conservation Corps. crews as a way to transition into the civilian workforce.



Chainsaws could be heard above the gusty winds on the hills of Barona Mesa on the outskirts of the Country Estates Thursday.

It was music to the ears of residents. Wind gusts like this precipitated some property owners to evacuate horses and struggle to save their homes back in 2003. Ron Hall remembers shoveling dirt on embers blowing around his ranch.

"One set the hay on fire and took part of the barn down. Thank God my wife insured the barn. Insurance was hard to get out here."

Diane Hall had to take two of their horses to a friend's place, then she couldn't get back home because of the Cedar Fire blocking the way.

"Cell phones didn't work well out here," Ron said, "There were no fire engines around. I had to go find one and ask them to come up here."

Most of the shrubbery on the property burned and embers came right up to the front door, he said.

Ron said the Witch Creek Fire in 2007 came within about 1/4 mile of their ranch.

This week, he stood looking toward El Capitan Reservoir in the distance and talked to Patch about his gratitude for a California Conservation Corps (CCC) crew working on a fuel break adjacent to his property. The break runs for about 5 miles and encompasses about 243 acres, from Ramona Oaks Road to the El Capitan Truck Trail. The crew includes young veterans who are transitioning back into the civilian workforce.

"These are just a bunch of good kids who have served their country," Ron said. "In January, they'll come back and burn these piles."

The crew has been working Monday to Thursday for a couple of months on the fuel break.

Officials with the CCC and Forest Service told Patch that they are using the long partnership between the agencies to help veterans ages 18 to 25 acquire additional career skills, while serving the public.

"It's hard for anyone to find work right now, so this is a great transition," said David Muraki, the CCC state director.

"It's the right thing to be doing, with our unemployment rate so high," said Rob Griffith of the Pacific Southwest Forest Service office. "And it's even higher for veterans. These are like proving grounds, recruitment grounds," he said. "The veterans come in with bulldozer skills, they've used radios and they've had first aid training, which is all useful."

Branden Gray and Amie Stokes are among the veterans hoping to find supervisor work with the Forest Service at the end of the six-month contract on the crew.

Gray earned two Purple Hearts during four years with the Marines, serving in [Iraq](#) and Afghanistan. He also was in a Special Forces team that went to Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and North Korea. Gray earned his awards after he was stabbed in the back in Baghdad and had his femoral artery almost severed by shrapnel in Afghanistan. He said he's looking for work that has a pace similar to the Special Forces.

Stokes was a Marine Corps helicopter mechanic, stationed at MCAS Miramar. She said she is looking forward to starting a new career after taking time to raise her four-year-old son.

Similar crews have been working in the Lake Tahoe Basin, Sierra National Forest, Inyo National Forest and Shasta-Trinity National Forest. One is directly funded by the state Assembly.