

Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury

Vallecito Conservation Camp #1

From Incarceration to Integration: Building Bridges to Reentry

June 2, 2025



SUMMARY

The Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury (CCCGJ) is required by law to inquire into the condition and management of detention centers within the County on an annual basis. There are two adult detention centers, Calaveras Country Adult Detention Facility (CCADF) and Vallecito Conservation Camp #1, located within Calaveras County.

This report summarizes the CCCGJ's inquiry into the Vallecito Conservation Camp #1. The CCCGJ found the Vallecito Conservation Camp #1 was very clean, organized, efficiently run and well maintained. The CCCGJ was left with a positive impression of the camp and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and CAL FIRE staff. The work being performed by the staff and incarcerated crews is vital to the county and state. The program provides numerous benefits to the community while offering opportunities for inmates to rehabilitate and reintegrate as productive members of the community.

GLOSSARY

CAL FIRE	California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
CCCGJ	Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury
CDCR	California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
GED	General Equivalency Diploma
MKU	Mobile Kitchen Unit
SCC	Sierra Conservation Center
VTC	Ventura Training Center

METHODOLOGY

Section 919(b) of the Penal Code mandates that the grand jury inquire into the conditions of any public prison within the county. Sections 919(a), 925 and 925(a) authorize the grand jury to investigate county and city jails and other detention facilities within their jurisdiction. The Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury (CCCGJ) requested and reviewed state and county inspections reports of the Vallecito Conservation Camp #1 from the last two years. CCCGJ also reviewed the established policies and procedures, and logs (e.g., safety cell, grievances, personnel training).

CCCGJ also toured the detention facility and had an opportunity to speak to California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) personnel and inmates and confirm practices were in line with current policies and procedures.

BACKGROUND

Vallecito Conservation Camp #1, located at 3225 Six Mile Road, Angels Camp, is a minimum-security correctional facility that is operated by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) in collaboration with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). The camp functions under the administrative oversight of the Sierra Conservation Center (SCC). It is capable of housing approximately 110 inmates.

The camp was established in 1958 with the mission to provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities to engage in fire suppression and flood control activities. CDCR is responsible for the security, supervision and care of the inmates. CAL FIRE maintains the camp and supervises the work performed by the incarcerated fire crews while in their custody. Inmates volunteer to participate in the conservation camp program and must undergo a physical health evaluation to ensure that they are able to carry out their expected duties.

Inmate fire crews were most recently deployed to support the Los Angeles fires. When not fighting fires, incarcerated crew members perform community service projects throughout the County which include:

- Fuel reduction and fire breaks in State and federal parks
- Control burns
- Hazardous tree removal
- Watershed and campground maintenance, including hiking trails
- Brush removal on county roads
- Ground maintenance at county schools, parks and cemeteries

Vallecito Conservation Camp #1 maintains and operates a mobile kitchen unit (MKU) which is dispatched to emergencies and can provide 350 meals to support firefighters on an active fire while prepping additional meals. Additionally, the camp operates a fire hose and repair station, and a chain saw maintenance and repair station for both Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties.

The camp offers rehabilitation and educational opportunities which include a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and college courses from Columbia College during their non-work hours. Incarcerated fire crews also obtain their initial certification to work on fires, with the opportunity to obtain additional CAL FIRE certifications which make them eligible to apply to become full-service firefighters upon release.

DISCUSSION

The Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury (CCCGJ) found the Vallecito Conservation Camp #1 to be well maintained for the age of the facilities, efficient and functional for its purpose. The staff were professional and interactions with inmates during the tour were respectful.

During the tour, the staff explained their commitment to the California Model which leverages national and international best practices to create a safe and satisfactory workplace environment, rehabilitation for those incarcerated, and improved success of re-entry efforts of decarcerated back into the community. One example discussed was related to an inmate who has been recently referred to the Ventura Training Center (VTC) Enhanced Firefighter Training program, which provides additional rehabilitation and job training skills to qualified inmates who upon successful completion of the program will be eligible to apply for entry-level firefighting jobs with local, state or federal firefighting agencies.

The camp is currently housing 64 inmates, which represents an in-house team and two strike crews consisting of 17 inmates per crew. The in-house team manages the operational activities within the camp, which include the laundry service for all inmates, meal preparations, and grounds maintenance. Additionally, the saw shop is operated by inmates who service and repair fire crew equipment. The camp currently has an inmate with significant small engine repair

experience who has developed a reputation for doing such great work within the Sierra Conservation Center that inmates from other camps will come to train with him and take that knowledge back to their camps. The camp also has a fire hose repair service, which reconditions and/or repairs fire hoses and returns them back to service.

During the off-season or when not supporting active fires, the strike teams work on community service projects such as fuel breaks, hazardous tree removal, campground clean up, trail work and controlled burns within Calaveras Big Trees State Park or Stanislaus National Forest. Residents may have seen crews clearing brush and debris along County roads. Crews may also be hired for lot clearing and fuel reduction on public property and may include grounds and building maintenance at county schools, cemeteries and the county fairgrounds.

Once inmates have completed their work duties, there are opportunities for recreational time or to visit the on-site library. Inmates also support sustainability efforts within the camp by planting an annual garden on-site and produce is then served as part of their meals. Inmates may also use the opportunity to work toward their GED or further their education by taking online courses offered by Columbia College.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, RESPONDENTS

Pursuant to Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury requires responses within 60 days from elected county official(s), and within 90 days from governing bodies. In order to be included and published in the next CCCGJ report, invited responses must be received within 90 days.

After conducting interviews and reviewing documents, CCCGJ's findings and recommendations are as follows:

F1: Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury left with a very positive opinion of the Vallecito Conservation Camp #1. The facility is well run, clean and properly maintained, and is being operated in an efficient manner by dedicated officers and staff.

Required Response

None

COMMENDATIONS

C1: Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury commends the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and CAL FIRE for their compassion, professionalism, and commitment to their jobs as well as to the inmates. The work being performed by the staff and incarcerated crews is vital to the county and state. The program provides numerous benefits to the community while offering opportunities for inmates to rehabilitate and reintegrate as productive members of the community.

DISCLAIMER

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify the individuals interviewed. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

REFERENCED SOURCES

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Accessed April 6, 2025.

<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/about-cdcr/>

Vallecito Conservation Camp #1. Accessed on April 6, 2025. <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/vallecito/>