

NEWS



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BRUSH REMOVAL CLEARS PATH TO BETTER FUTURE FOR HUNDREDS OF LOCAL YOUTH

-- Fire Fuel Reduction Program Partners with US Forest Service to Create Defensible Space --

With seasonal precipitation levels well above average and the height of fire season several months away, fire prevention is the last thing on the mind of most San Diegan's. Yet for the U.S Forest Service and other agencies who work to keep San Diego fire-safe, now is the time to clear out swaths of defensible space tracks that will give fire fighters a fighting chance in the event of an out-of-control blaze.

This year the Forest Service has help. Urban Corps of San Diego County's Fire Fuel Reduction (FFR) Program is employing hundreds of San Diego youth to work alongside crews from the U.S. Forest Service and the Viejas Fire Department to create defensible space in the backcountry. The \$1.7 million program, funded primarily by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) through San Diego Workforce Partnership, is offering paid work experience to more than 300 youth underrepresented in the workforce while creating a safer environment for county residents.

According to U.S. Forest Service Battalion Chief John Forster of the Cleveland National Forest Palomar Ranger District, the increased rainfall since July 2010 has led to an abundance of fire fuel growth. Crews are conducting vegetation removal and prescribed burning through May 2011 on 250 acres of Forest Service Land that adjoins San Diego Country Estates for the purpose of community defense, fuel break maintenance and forest health.

"Forest Service land, like many regions throughout the county, is in need of brush clearing to be ready for fire season," said Chief Forster. "So when Urban Corps came to us last fall with the FFR proposal, we were ready.

"This is an opportunity for these young people to see what we do," Forster emphasized. "The youth are learning about fire breaks, fire shelters, native flora and fauna, and what it takes to join the Forest Service. We already have several that have expressed interest in pursuing this as a career and we will strongly encourage them."

Before being sent out in the field, Corpmember participants attend an intensive week-long orientation in which they receive certified training on fire fuel reduction methods and leadership in order to qualify them as a certified member of a fire hand crew. The training, conducted by Urban Corps and the Viejas Fire Department, includes hand tool use and chainsaw safety designed to enhance job skills and work site performance. A handful of

participants have also attained their class B commercial licenses to become drivers for the program, ultimately becoming more employable in the workforce. Participants working with the U.S. Forest Service attend an introductory workshop to find out more about the opportunities and dangers of becoming a firefighter.

“We are leaning a lot about the mountains in Ramona working with U.S Forest Service fire fighters, which is great because I had never been here before,” says FFR participant Benjamin Williams, who joined the program in January. “I like being outdoors and working with my hands. When I was younger I used to camp a lot. This is a great program and afterwards I am thinking about becoming a firefighter. I think it would be a good career for me.”

That is exactly the scenario that San Diego Workforce Partnership was hoping for when they came to Urban Corps last October with a budget of just over \$1.1 million for youth employment through fire prevention and mitigation services. It was Urban Corps that called its community partners and quickly leveraged the FFR Program to over \$1.7 million. In addition to the U.S. Forest Service, sponsors of this program include the cities of Chula Vista and Poway, Sweetwater Authority, and the Viejas Fire Department with an in-kind contribution. The City of San Diego is expected to come on board this spring.

There are three cohorts of FFR crews scheduled for participation. So far 104 youth have been hired and more than 200 more will join the program before the end of March. To qualify for the program, applicants must meet low-income guidelines and have at least one barrier to employment such as a disability, limited English proficiency, a court record or history in the foster care system. The participants work in the field four days per week and go to school at Urban Corps’ onsite charter high school one day per week to receive academic instruction and class credit as well as a rigorous work readiness education through the Corps-to-Career Department.

Since 1989, the Urban Corps has served as a bridge to a better life for thousands of disadvantaged youth. The organization provides paid green job training in the fields of recycling, conservation and community service while offering young people a second chance to earn their high school diploma at the onsite John Muir Charter School.

For more information on Urban Corps and the FFR Program, contact Klara Arter at 619-235-6884 or email karter@urbancorps.org. To reach U.S. Forest Service Battalion Chief John Forster of the Cleveland National Forest Palomar Ranger District, call 760-788-0250.

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U.S. Forest Service Battalion Chief John Forster points out the fire break area completed so far in the Cleveland National Forest above San Diego Country Estates to Urban Corps Environmental Services manager Les Nettles as a youth Corpsmember Leonel Lopez works on brush removal in the distance.



After a positive work experience in Urban Corps' Fire Fuel Reduction Program, several participants like Benjamin Williams – shown here assisting in the creation of a fire break for the protection of San Diego Country Estates – are showing significant interest in pursuing a career in fire fighting.



After participating in the Fire Fuel Reduction Program, Corpsmembers can add proper tool handling and safety to their resume of work experience skills. Here Leonel Lopez handles a pick ax with confidence.



The Viejas Fire Department conducted chainsaw safety and operations training in January for FFR participants prior to the start of work. So far 104 youth have been hired and more than 200 more will join the program by the end of March.



A U.S. Forest Service firefighter conducts a controlled burn in the Cleveland National Forest creating defensible space above San Diego Country Estates. Meanwhile, youth Corpsmembers in the Urban Corps Fire Fuel Reduction program work to extend the fire break in the distance. A minimal amount of chaparral is left within the fire break for aesthetic purposes.