

THE VETERANS FIRE CORPS

2016 BY THE NUMBERS:

52 CURRENT ERA
VETERANS TRAINED

22,146 PROJECT WORK HOURS

526 ACRES IMPROVED
(INCLUDING PRESCRIBED BURNS)

38 MILES OF FIREBREAK
CREATED AND MAINTAINED



CONSERVATION
legacy

OVERVIEW:

The Veterans Fire Corps (VFC) is collaborative initiative of Conservation Legacy, The California Conservation Corps and the Student Conservation Association run in partnership with state and federal agencies including the US Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Corporation for National and Community Service. VFC engages recent era Veterans on priority hazardous fuels projects while developing the next generation of wildland firefighters.

VFC successfully addresses two needs 1) veterans who need a way to transition from military to civilian service and 2) land management agencies who need highly qualified and well trained employees. VFC builds upon the knowledge, leadership experience and training of the men and women who served in the armed forces, retraining them and refocusing their mission to protecting our public lands from the threat of wildfire.

In 2016, Conservation Legacy engaged **52** current era veterans throughout the Southwest, training and preparing them for jobs in wildland fire while accomplishing priority projects identified by US Forest Service partners. Two Conservation Legacy programs, Arizona Conservation Corps and Southwest Conservation Corps, served veterans over this time period providing S-212, S-130/190, First Aid and some additional advanced trainings including Incident Management and Felling Boss.

Project work was varied but primarily focused on forest fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, prescribed burn preparation and invasive species removal. The forest fuels reduction was the majority of the project work and was focused on treating high-density areas with heavy fuel loads. Veteran fire crews reduced fire fuel loads that included Piñon, Juniper, Ponderosa, and Oak on public lands through Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. Invasive species projects were primarily focused on the removal of Tamarisk and Russian Olive.

VFC PROJECT LOCATIONS:

- CIBOLA NATIONAL FOREST
- GRAND MESA, UNCOMPAHGRE and GUNNISON NATIONAL FORESTS
- LINCOLN NATIONAL FOREST
- PIKE AND SAN ISABEL NATIONAL FORESTS
- RIO GRANDE NATIONAL FOREST
- SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST
- TONTO NATIONAL FOREST



THE MODEL:

Veterans Fire Corps targets recent era Veterans, generally between the ages of 23-35. Veterans joining the program are AmeriCorps members, receive a living allowance, training, and support while working on projects varying in length from 12-weeks to six months. Veterans enrolled in the program receive all mandatory training to become certified as a Firefighter Type 2. They are then utilized on thinning projects, pile burning projects and prescribed burns.

Most applicants applying to the program are searching for a way to transition from the military to civilian world. "Vets speak a common language," said a former Army interrogator and past participant. He 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 realized that his anxiety around post-traumatic stress seemed to fade the longer he spent living with his "comrades" among trees and streams.

The mission of the program completes when, after serving with the Veterans Fire Corps, crew members gain employment as wildland firefighters. Because many of the VFC crews work alongside agency fire crews, they often are able to network and learn about opportunities locally and make connections with hiring managers long before any job openings are available.



“I found myself looking for meaning and purpose in life again when I came across the VFC posting. After some research, I knew I had found a once in a lifetime opportunity into a better life and new world.”

**- Chau Huyhn,
VFC Alumni, Former U.S. Army**

2016 TOTAL VETERANS FIRE CORPS DATA:

DATA COMPILED FROM ALL PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

52 TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

53% OF VETERANS SURVEYED INDICATED THEY HAVE **GAINED OR ARE PURSUING RELATED POST-PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT**

90% OF VETERANS SURVEYED INDICATED THAT THE VFC **ASSISTED THEM IN ADJUSTING FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE**

95% OF VETERANS SURVEYED INDICATED THAT THE VFC **PREPARED THEM FOR ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT IN WILDLAND FIRE**

VET AND COMMUNITY IMPACT:

Since 2011, the California Conservation Corps, Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association have engaged over **750** Veterans. The majority of VFC members have been hired onto a wildland fire crew with a state or federal agency, found employment with a land management agency in a job unrelated to fire, returned to participate in or lead additional VFC crews or continued into higher education for natural resource management.

The combination of completing meaningful work, engaging in this work along with other Veterans focused on a common goal is what makes the VFC program so impactful. It contains the mission, structure, camaraderie and sense of professional and personal purpose that is critical to helping current-era Veterans transition from a successful career in the military to a successful career back at home.

FOREST HIGHLIGHTS:

LINCOLN NATIONAL FOREST

IN 2016 ARIZONA CONSERVATION CORPS TUCSON PARTNERED WITH THE LINCOLN NATIONAL FOREST (LNF)

to operate a three month AmeriCorps Veteran Fire Corps Programs. The crew served on each of the three districts on the forest conducting fire fuels reduction, prescribed burns, and burn preparation. The program was able to serve an eight person crew comprised of six veterans and two crew leaders.

All Program participants received Fire Fighter Type II Training (S130/190/I100/L180) and S212 training and certification as FAL3 and were red carded through the US Forest Service. On average, program participants acquired 450 hours of fire-fuels on the job experience over the course of their terms of service. Participants worked directly alongside LNF employees for much of their season. Arizona Conservation Corps partnered with the Lincoln National Forest on the following projects:

ROAD THINNING: the crew cut Ponderosa, Piñon, and Juniper to reduce fire fuels and improve forest health outside of Ruidoso, NM.

CEDAR CREEK Rx: the crew aided USFS resources in a broadcast burn. Goals of the burn were to introduce fire to improve forest health on a Ponderosa stand. The crew aided with ignition, patrolling, holding and mop up.

COX CANYON/RICE Rx: the crew aided in the ignition, patrolling and mop up of pile burning done on the Sacramento district.

WET BURNT CANYON Rx PREP: the crew helped to do advanced preparation of dozer and handline with the use of hand tools, brush cutters and chainsaws.

SOLDIER Rx PREP: the crew removed brush in advance of a handline. Work included cutting and re-moving Piñon, Juniper and scrub oak.



AZCC LNF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The VFC accomplished the following on Lincoln NF between September and December of 2016:

Acres Treated/Cleared: 6.4 Acres

Acres Burned/Rx: 36 Acres

Control Line Maintained: 5.7 Miles

Hours Worked: 3,120 Hours

2016 AZCC TUCSON VFC ALUMNI:

Kyle Booker: Committed to Sacramento Hotshots

Tyler Harms: Committed to Sacramento Hotshots

Micah Roberts: Committed to Sacramento Hotshots

Chau Huyhn: Returning to VFC

Michael Schiaffo: Returning to VFC

Brandon Sena: Seeking fire employment in California



SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST

SCC HAS BEEN PARTNERING WITH THE SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST (SJNF) to run Veterans Fire Corps since 2009,

when the first Veterans Fire Corps in the nation was piloted on the Pagosa Ranger District. Since then, we've developed a robust and working partnership and often the Forest, SCC and other partners from the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership work together to leverage funds from existing projects to acquire additional funding to accomplish more work on the ground.

In 2016, SCC and the SJNF applied for \$54,000 in funding from the Partnership for the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) to match the \$100,000 regional USFS allocation and the \$25,000 that the Pagosa Ranger District acquired in Colorado State Habitat funds. All of the funding was awarded which allowed our VFC crews to put in 20 full weeks of project work. The crews were able to engage in fence removal for habitat improvement, hand thinning with chainsaws, prescribed burn prep and prescribed burning.

"The thinning, piling and fence removal improved forest conditions and will allow for additional, larger scale treatments in the project areas," Fred Ellis, AFMO on the Pagosa RD said of the project, "The vets are hard workers and want to complete a quality product."



REGION 3 VEGETATION AND FIRE EFFECTS MONITORING CREW

IN THE FALL OF 2016 THE USFS REGION 3 PARTNERED WITH ARIZONA CONSERVATION CORPS to host the first Veterans Vegetation and Fire Effects Monitoring Crew. The program aimed to engage recent era (post-911) veterans in a four month long professional development program focused on fuels and vegetation sampling as well as introducing participants to the broad array of careers in federal land management. This crew's primary work activity was to sample and measure vegetation associated with planned or implemented hazardous fuels projects.

The crew began their service with a week of wilderness preparedness training including Wilderness First Aid, Leave No Trace Training, and primers on living and working in a small cohort in the outdoors. The crew then spent a week on the Payson Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest for intensive training in vegetation sampling and monitoring with our USFS

lead, Tessa Nicolet. The crew spent the remaining 13 weeks of the season hopping between different forests in Region 3 performing site samples and inventories. Work was performed on the Tonto, Kaibab, Coconino, Carson, Lincoln, Coronado and Santa Fe National Forests. Every two weeks crew members would have the opportunity to meet with or shadow agency employees from other divisions and learn about other avenues of employment with the agency. Crew members were able to work with wildlife biologists, range managers, foresters and fire program leads.

At the conclusion of the program two of the three members were seeking agency employment, both on the Lincoln National Forest. Kim Kuhar, a long time partner with AZCC's Veteran Fire Corps Program, was working with the members to pursue fuels monitoring positions on the Smokey Bear Ranger District of that forest.



BOOTS ON THE GROUND:

LOREN RUSSELL

Southwest Conservation Corps, Los Valles Region

I OFFICIALLY SEPARATED FROM THE US AIRFORCE ONE WEEK BEFORE THIS PROGRAM STARTED. In the Air Force I was a US Airforce Intelligence Officer stationed in Japan for my last hitch. I flew over 800 combat hours as an airborne reconnaissance crew member providing threat warning and intelligence reporting to US and Coalition ground troops in Afghanistan.

I was in charge of 26 people while in the military at the end of my service. I was the boss. I learned how to be the boss differently here and what being the boss can mean. I learned to support leadership differently, I learned that I can be a member of something and be a powerful voice and still be humble. Finally, I feel like I was able to 'pay it forward' a little bit.

I have never had an opportunity to spend this much time outside and to be that impacted by the environment as I have been this year. I have learned to take care of myself and to help the team take care of themselves and to see how we impact the environment. I've learned skills that I have always wanted to learn and these skills will help me find a post-military path that has meaning and service.

“The VFC can be helpful not only for vets to get new skills and reintegrate into civilian life but it can be a place where people learn to use their voice for positive change I would like to think I helped people to start being solution-oriented.”

I am applying to wildland fire and prescribe burn crews now, using this experience to help me get into the field at the ground level. I also am registering to get more schooling in this field of work and study: wildland fire, forestry and GIS work. I know that my experience in aviation with the military and with fire and saw work here in the SCC will help me to follow a path that I have wanted to follow but never thought possible.

I seem to be at my best when I am serving and looking to help others do better, not when I looking for my own greatness. I think helping others be great would be a great legacy.

