

# Rim Fire: Prisoners Helping to Battle Massive Blaze

California inmates provide crucial front-line help to fire department.



Female inmate firefighters hike to cut fireline on the 2008 Telegraph Fire near Yosemite National Park.

*Photograph by Ron Lewis, AP*

**Katya Cengel**

for National Geographic

**Published August 30, 2013**

**On their third day on the job fighting the California Rim Fire, Alan Jackson and his team were near Groveland, a small town just outside Yosemite National Park in central California, cutting containment lines.**

**"It was so smoky nobody could see nobody," says Jackson. "You couldn't see where you were**

**driving."**

Using the equivalent of garden tools—chainsaws, axes, and hoes—the crew scraped the ground surrounding the base camp to bare soil, creating a barrier between the fire and the unburned brush and trees, desperately trying to contain a fire that has already burned more than 300 square miles of land and is only about 30 percent contained. (See "Pictures: Battling the Yosemite Rim Fire")

As a kid, Jackson, who is 31, thought he would become a firefighter or cop. Instead, he ended up a prison inmate, sentenced to eight years for first-degree burglary and second-degree robbery. Ironically, thanks to a program partnered by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire), Jackson is realizing his early dream. Instead of spending time behind bars, he's spent the last four years at a CDCR fire camp, where he learned his current trade. (Related: "Why Big, Intense Wildfires Are the New Normal.")

Of the 4,840 personnel battling the Rim Fire, more than 550 are inmates. "They're the work horses," says firefighter specialist Jason Toshack of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

The inmates cut lines alongside the elite "hot shot" civilian crews, explains Toshack, who has worked with the program for more than six years. With miles and miles of lines to be cut, and "hot shot" crews in short supply, fighting the fire without the help of inmates would be "scrambling, to say the least."



Inmate firefighters battle the Rim Fire near Yosemite National Park.

*Photograph by Jae C. Hong, AP*

## **Prisoners Wear Orange But Save Green**

On Wednesday, day 12 of the state's sixth largest fire in history, the charred ground around the main base

camp still smoldered in spots and the air was thick with smoke. But the base camp, Incident Command Post, seven miles east of Groveland, is safe. (Watch: "Yosemite Sequoias Need Fire.")

Jackson sleeps at a second base camp in Tuolumne, on the western edge of Yosemite, in a large tent with around 30 other men, who work in 24-hour shifts. He is third in command of the team, and talks in the jargon of his profession, describing "spot fires" that "jump the line" and "go into the green." Only his bright orange jumpsuit and heavily tattooed skin sets him apart from the others.

There are 200 firefighting crews made up of 4,110 inmates stationed at 42 fire camps around the state as part of the program, which saves taxpayers well over \$80 million a year. In return for their service, inmates are allowed to stay at a camp where they live in barracks and receive generous pay by prison standards—\$1 an hour fighting fires and \$1.35 to \$2.65 per day at other times. Many also get up to two days cut from their sentence for every day in camp. (Related: "With Rim Fire Near, A Look at Yosemite's History With Fire.")

Only minimum-security prisoners—most are nonviolent offenders—are eligible for the program. After their release, some of the men have gone on to become firefighters in the civilian world.

The inmate crews are a vital force in the battle against wildfires, says Cal Fire Captain Mike Mohler. At the Rim Fire, the inmate crews play a crucial role in building the containment line that regular engine crews can't reach in the rough terrain.

"A lot of people think you pull that fire engine up and just pull a hose out and fight fire," says Mohler. "That's not the case. We're talking inmates who hike miles and miles just to get where they're going to start, and then cut line all through the day." Though the inmate teams are housed and fed separately, and must wear orange fire suits instead of yellow, on the fire line "the colors bleed the same," he says. (Read more about wildfires in *National Geographic* magazine.)

The competitive mentality of inmates is an advantage in the business of fighting fires, Toshack points out. "Nobody wants to be outdone, nobody wants to be seen as weak, because in prison weak is the last thing you want," he says. "We kind of use that a little bit."



An inmate crew from San Diego works on a steep slope to extinguish the Rim Fire.

*Photograph by Max Whittaker, Reuters*

## New Chance to Be a Hero

After spending seven hours cutting a wide line in steep, rocky terrain covered with heavy brush, Reginald Williamson, who is on Toshack's team, ate a hearty breakfast of biscuits and gravy, potatoes, and eggs. Before he landed in jail with a ten-year sentence for second-degree burglary, Williamson, a slim 41-year-old man with a sprinkle of gray in his stubble and a chipped front tooth, was a flooring technician. He is four years into his sentence, with plenty of time to reflect on his life and choices.

(Related: "The Military Roots of Fighting Modern Wildfires.")

Being on a fire crew is a way to give back, but the risks are real. Injury and death are part of the equation. Williamson himself has been burned on his face. But he is grateful for lessons learned: lessons about teamwork, consideration for others, and how to respect authority. Most of all, there is the grace of gratitude. (Also Read: "How Sequoias Survive Wildfires, in Yosemite and Beyond.")

There was, for example, the little girl who approached and handed him a card: "Thank you, firefighters, for helping us and thank you for saving us," it said.

Best of all were the words from his 13-year-old daughter, Larissa.

"She called me her hero," he said.

**7 comments**

[Sign in](#)

**8 people listening**

