

‘Burning Issues’: Incarcerated Firefighting Programs in the U.S.

by

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Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies/Writing in partial fulfillment for the
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ABSTRACT

There are at least 15 states in the U.S. that use incarcerated people to fight wildland fires: Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming. This thesis outlines the broad adoption and ad-hoc nature of these programs, as well as the wide variation in data available about their operation. Though incarcerated men and women have been fighting fires in the U.S. for decades, many of these programs have received very little public scrutiny.

The impacts of climate change, such as drought and warmer temperatures, have increased the likelihood of wildfires and the portion of the year when those fires are likely to spark. As climate change intensifies and the costs of disasters increase — in 1990, the U.S. spent \$390 million fighting wildfires and in 2021, the nation spent \$2.3 billion — the U.S. will have a growing need for firefighting labor. Meanwhile, the federal government is struggling to hire enough firefighters to meet the demand. Though numerous variables contribute to the creation, maintenance, and size of incarcerated firefighting programs, increasing and more dangerous fire activity could push states to consider using this labor more often. That makes it essential to understand the scope of these programs as well as their ultimate effect on participants.

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The inferno that came to be known as the Carr Fire began in July 2018, when the rim of a flat camping trailer tire scraped the pavement of a state highway like steel on flint, throwing sparks onto dry grass in Northern California's Whiskeytown National Recreation Area. The fire spread quickly, growing from a collection of manageable flames to an extreme conflagration in less than 72 hours. By the time Joseph Quintero arrived as part of a New Mexico-based fire crew contracted to help fight the blaze, the base of firefighting operations outside the fire's perimeter was humming with focused urgency. The atmosphere — and the thrill of the risky work — filled Quintero with adrenaline. This was the biggest fire he'd ever seen.

During his 21 days fighting the Carr Fire, Quintero spent most of his time on a fire engine carrying water. The engine trailed crews on foot as they pulled up vegetation and stripped the ground to pure mineral soil — a process known as “digging line” that keeps fire from spreading further. When flames jumped the line, a 29-year-old Quintero, the crew's youngest member, would hop off the engine with a hose and drown it.

It took thousands of firefighters more than a month to tame the hungry flames. By that time, the Carr Fire had scorched more than 200,000 acres, making it one of California's largest wildfires. At one point, it sucked enough hot air up into the sky to create its own weather system.

For Quintero, intense blazes like this one are an exhilarating part of a job that also provides focus and purpose. “It's real therapeutic for me — just cutting, being out here in the beautiful nature,” he says, in a scrubby section of New Mexico forest along the Rio Grande River. One day, he says, he might even like to join the highly trained, elite crews that are deployed into the most dangerous parts of fires.

For now, though, he's fighting fire on a crew run through a collaboration between the New Mexico Department of Corrections and the state's Forestry Division. That's because he's currently serving his third term in prison. Quintero got his first taste of fighting fire during an earlier period of incarceration, as part of the state's Inmate Work Camp Program, a crew of firefighters run out of the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility. The state pays incarcerated firefighters up to \$2.50 an hour to cut trees and dig fire lines all around New Mexico. After Quintero was released in 2017, he got forestry jobs on the outside, like working in California on the Carr Fire. But about six months after his release, he was found with a small quantity of drugs during a traffic stop, which was a violation of his parole. In 2020 he ended up back in prison in Los Lunas, a small town about 25 miles south of Albuquerque.

Incarcerated people fight fires as part of official programs in more than a dozen states in the U.S. The work they perform is similar to that of their non-incarcerated counterparts: They dig fire line, drown hot spots, and beat back flames amid mind-bending danger and heat. Today, the environment in which these programs operate is changing rapidly. Development in fire-prone areas has changed the frequency and intensity of American interaction with wildfires. Climate change is expected to make wildfires more extreme. And currently, the U.S. is facing a desperate shortage of firefighters. As climate change intensifies, states may be tempted to draw on incarcerated firefighting labor more often.

These ad hoc programs, which are primarily run by individual states, have different standards for data collection and regulation. That means that though incarcerated men and women have been fighting fires in the U.S. for decades, many of the programs have received little public scrutiny, and much about their operation remains unknown, including their ultimate effect on participants.

About 150 miles southeast of the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility where the state houses its incarcerated firefighting program, the state's Forestry Division has built an ode to an iconic mascot.

Smokey Bear Historical Park is in Capitan, a small New Mexico town cradled by rocky peaks north of the Lincoln National Forest. In 1950, just six years after the federal government created a fictional, firefighting bear as part of a war-time campaign to conserve lumber, firefighters discovered a two-month-old black bear cub among the cinders of a wildfire in those woods. They named the cub after Smokey, giving the imaginary icon a real-world analog. A small museum located on the tiny park's grounds is covered with nostalgic memorabilia, ranging from the classic, "Only YOU can prevent forest fires" posters to the real-life Smokey's small leather bear harness. For more than seven decades, Smokey has served as an emblem of the country's approach to wildfires: smother every spark.

That attitude is rooted in the early twentieth century. The U.S. government founded the Forest Service in 1905, part of efforts to conserve forests and regulate the explosion of private logging and grazing in the West on land the U.S. had seized from Native Americans. As the agency's first rangers started their work, they faced resistance from settlers accustomed to more expedient land management that had allowed them to graze, log, or clear land as they saw fit.

Then, in August 1910, a massive wildfire burned through about three million acres in Idaho and Montana. It killed more than six dozen firefighters and the smoke drifted all the way to Boston. The event is sometimes called the Big Burn, other times the Big Blowup. One forester is reported to have called it "a veritable red demon from hell."

Fire is a natural part of many ecosystems. Periodic burns thin vegetation — reducing fuel for future fires — and renew soil. But 1910 was the first time that much of the nation had ever seen or heard of fire like this. After the Big Burn, the young Forest Service framed aggressive fire suppression as a form of heroic patriotism. Before Smokey, the Forest Service used a poster of Uncle Sam to communicate the message that forest fires were an ever-present enemy.

In 1933, a New Deal work relief program called the Civilian Conservation Corps put single, unemployed men to work in forestry and firefighting. It didn't take long before states began using inmates to do similar work. Washington State created its first "offender honor camps" in 1939. California established temporary firefighting camps a few years later, after the firefighting workforce had been depleted due to World War II troops shipping abroad. Over the next few decades, the camps spread throughout the country, with programs cropping up in states from Georgia to Arizona.

Today, while California's incarcerated firefighting program remains the largest and best known in the nation, at least 14 other states also fight wildfires using incarcerated labor. The Federal

Bureau of Prisons operates incarcerated firefighting programs in another two states. Those workers fight fires in Western states such as Oregon and Colorado, where wildfires make national news, but also in more unexpected locations like North Carolina and South Dakota.

Still more states have no formal incarcerated firefighting program but reserve the right to deploy incarcerated labor in emergencies. An analysis of emergency planning documents conducted by researchers at Texas A&M University found that 30 states included incarcerated labor in disaster preparation plans. Ten of those states explicitly allow for incarcerated firefighters, including some, like Arkansas and Texas, which do not currently have official programs.

The ad-hoc nature and broad adoption of these programs raises a number of issues, ranging from the ethics of using incarcerated labor to the widespread lack of planning for the rising costs of disasters. These issues are only going to become more pressing: Studies have shown that climate change has contributed to a spike in weather-related disasters over the past half-century. And as human development continues to reach into previously uninhabited forests, humans are coming face-to-face with wildfires more than ever.

Though warmer temperatures and higher incidence of drought means fire season is changing, there isn't necessarily a direct line between climate-worsened wildfire and more or bigger incarcerated firefighting programs. But as fires intensify and the costs to fight them climb, states may increasingly consider using incarcerated labor, in part to save money. States have already cited budgetary considerations as justification for the programs: In introducing North Carolina's program, the governor reportedly said it would save the state a "tremendous" sum. New Mexico also supported the introduction of its program in part with economic arguments. In 1996, Jennifer Salisbury, New Mexico's Secretary of Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources, said the state's program would focus on "labor-intensive projects that right now the department doesn't have the funding to implement."

Those familiar with the programs disagree on whether they're an important way to train the next generation of firefighters while performing essential forest management work on the cheap, or a form of exploitative and dangerous labor.

Some sociologists, criminal justice advocates, and former participants argue the programs exploit incarcerated labor in hazardous circumstances. And calls to reform the programs — by providing higher wages, post-incarceration employment opportunities, and more agency for incarcerated workers — have grown in recent years.

Those dynamics, along with the conflicting and complex viewpoints about the programs, create a U.S. relationship with incarcerated firefighting as complicated as the national relationship to fire.

It's around 5:45 in the morning and roughly 15 degrees below freezing when a line of orange-clothed men trudges out of a metal door on the side of the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility. They walk through chain-link fences crowned with spools of barbed wire and into an idling white truck with "New Mexico Forestry Division Fire Crew" stamped on its side. The

vehicle will ferry them to the section of the prison where the New Mexico Inmate Work Camp Program houses its fire tools.

By six AM, the firefighters are hurriedly gathering sleeping bags, water bottles, and fire-resistant coveralls to load into the truck. The group was woken up too late to eat breakfast and a miscommunication on the part of prison staffers meant lunches weren't packed, so they throw MREs — brown packets of unappetizing “meals ready-to-eat” originally created to feed soldiers in combat — into the truck. “Chaotic, huh?” says Michael Gonzales, a wildland firefighter with the state Forestry Division who has been working with New Mexico's program for about two decades and now leads it. Less than 20 minutes later, the carrier doors slam and the truck heads north, past the fences, the prison, and towards the forest.

Opportunities to be outside the prison are one reason why many participants in incarcerated firefighting programs want to join them; the programs offer an alternative — if only temporary — to notoriously horrific conditions on the inside. And New Mexico's carceral system, like many in the U.S., has a history of brutally inhumane conditions.

In 1980, those conditions rose to the event of national news when inmates took control of a state penitentiary, calling for an end to overcrowding and harassment by guards. The takeover started just before two AM on a chilly Saturday morning. Prison inhabitants broke into the prison hospital and raided it for pharmaceuticals, heaved a fire extinguisher at the glass of the facility's control center until it busted, and used torches to burn through walls. By the time the uprising ended 36 hours later, more than 30 inmates lay dead. “Significant security lapses, understaffing, inadequate training and poor living conditions plagued the penitentiary,” according to a state attorney general report describing the circumstances that led to the chaos. Cuts to prison programming helped push frustrations to a boil. It would become known as one of the most significant prison uprisings in U.S. history.

The New Mexico attorney general's report on the event called for an overhaul in how the state treats its incarcerated population. “Prisons simply do not deal with the basic problems of crime in our society,” the report reads. “Prison is a dehumanizing experience ... If New Mexico does not dramatically change its philosophy and practices about how to deal with criminals, there will be more tragedies.”

In the aftermath of the uprising, the state agreed to a consent decree that still regulates carceral operations in New Mexico. The agreement sets standards on overcrowding, food services, and other aspects of prison life. Today, many criminal justice-reform organizations are pushing for further changes. “Abuse cases are very common. Being able to prove them is not common,” said Steven Allen, an attorney and the director of the New Mexico Prison and Jail Project, which pursues cases related to abuses inside the state's prisons.

New Mexico started its incarcerated fire program after below-average rainfall helped fuel a particularly grueling fire year for the Southwest. In early May of 1996, which falls outside of New Mexico's traditional summer fire season, the state was experiencing fire conditions it had never seen before. The governor declared a state of emergency.

Later that month, just a few days after the U.S. Forest Service pulled specialized fire crews from other fires to fight a blaze outside Taos, directors of the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department and the Department of Corrections appeared at a local government meeting in Lincoln County — just north of the birthplace of the real-life Smokey Bear — to pitch a plan to increase the workforce available to fight fires and perform land management work by training inmates from a nearby prison.

“This summer’s catastrophic fire season underscored the need to find a way to restore the integrity of our natural resources and protect our homes and communities that border on forest lands,” read a booklet about the proposed program that was distributed to legislators that year. “The need is urgent, the time is now, the solution is at hand.”

The state launched a pilot program even before the governor signed legislation in 1998 that officially established and funded the Inmate Work Camp Program. The program, modeled after an existing one in Nevada, would be open to minimum security male and female inmates. Incarcerated workers would make between 40 and 80 cents an hour to help thin forests and maintain land. (Those wages have since been increased to between \$1.50 and \$2.50 an hour, the maximum pay rate for inmates in New Mexico). Wages for non-incarcerated wildland firefighters are at least six times higher, making programs like this a bargain for financially squeezed government departments.

Today, the Inmate Work Camp program is housed at the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas. Until recently, the minimum-security inmates — called Level Ones — who are eligible to participate in the firefighting program lived in a separate part of the prison, sometimes referred to as the Farm. Getting there from Albuquerque requires driving past the prison’s main entrance and down a long road that splits fallow fields. On the left, a red tractor with a sign that reads “Penitentiary Farm Est. 1939” tells you you’re on the right path. Like other areas of the prison, parts of the Level One facility are hemmed in with fencing and barbed wire, but here it feels more like a formality than an earnest security measure.

A little over a year ago, due to a shortage of correctional officers and a decline in the incarcerated population, the prison moved all the Level Ones to the main higher security facility. The Farm facility is now deserted, except for the Forestry employees that work in its offices. The quiet yard and squat brown stucco buildings evoke a ghost town out of a Western film. Outside the library, a sign on printer paper reads “went to the bathroom.” (In April of 2022, Corrections put the entire firefighting program on hold after an inmate walked off a project site. He hasn’t been found).

Warden Tim Hatch, the prison’s highest ranking official, says the Level One facility is unlikely to be back in operation soon. “Until the population swings back up, if it ever swings back up, the Farm just isn’t on the table right now,” he says from his office desk, as a blues riff from his phone alerts him of a notification.

Hatch, a self-proclaimed “security guy” with close-cropped hair, worked in prisons in Texas and New Mexico before becoming the Warden at this facility in 2021. He sees the work camp

program as a boon, because it gives inmates “a purpose other than sitting idly around and coming up with all the bad things that seem to go through their head.”

According to several program participants, working on fire crews helps build back a sense of humanity that’s torn down inside the prison gates. “When you’re in there, you’re treated more as a number,” says Albert Shelby, a 51-year-old inmate with an easy laugh who says he ran from his first fire. “But when we come out here — I’ve had so many firefighters shake my hand. And [Program Director Michael Gonzales] gets aggravated at me, but he actually treats me like a person.”

Lawrence Jaramillo is one of the New Mexico Inmate Work Program’s greatest success stories. His story is even included in its press materials.

When Jaramillo was first assigned to the firefighting program in 2015, he thought he would have preferred a less intense assignment, like picking up trash as part of a highway crew. But eventually, he found a passion for the work and a skill for making trees crash down in the spots he chose.

After his release in January 2018, Jaramillo went back to his old job tiling floors and got temporary gigs over the summers working as a seasonal firefighter for the state. But after getting stiffed on a tiling job at a Santa Fe mansion in late 2019, he decided it was time to take a chance on a dream he’d had since his time fighting fires while incarcerated. Jaramillo partnered with another ex-incarcerated firefighter to start a company called All Around Forestry. When the company launched, it got feel-good coverage from ABC News and local TV stations, which framed the story as an example of life’s second chances.

But success did not come easily: Jaramillo’s partner left the business, jobs trickled in slowly, and the economy-crippling COVID pandemic hit. Jaramillo is lighthearted; during a recent lunch at a Mexican restaurant in Albuquerque he joked about everything from the Elon Musk-level money he saved up while fighting fire to how best to split the check. But when it comes to business, he is earnest; Jaramillo — a single father who spent years in prison — says launching his company is one of the hardest things he’s ever done.

“I put everything that I had into this business,” he says.

The company is still drawing in customers and working on projects around Albuquerque and, despite the difficulties, Jaramillo’s story is one of accomplishment. Not only has he found work outside of prison, but he’s also started his own business, kept it afloat, and hired other formerly incarcerated people. It’s the type of future that many incarcerated firefighting programs say they hope to foster for participants.

North Carolina named its incarcerated firefighting program BRIDGE, an acronym for Building, Rehabilitating, Instructing, Developing, Growing, and Employing. The manager of Nevada’s program says reducing recidivism and instilling work ethic are among its chief goals. Corrections Departments across the country frame firefighting programs as a form of rehabilitation, a way to reduce recidivism, and valuable training for a life post-incarceration.

But, outside of anecdotal examples like Jaramillo's story, it's difficult to tell if programs are making good on that messaging. Few appear to keep or regularly track data verifying those claims — and those that do have shown mixed results.

Overall, the functioning of incarcerated firefighting programs is strikingly opaque. In some states, even basic information about them can be difficult to gather. Oftentimes, the programs are run through a partnership between the Department of Corrections and whichever state department is charged with managing forests, which means details on their operation may be split between the two agencies. Because the programs are created and managed by states, there is variation on how data is gathered and organized. In Georgia, the Department of Corrections provides some information on its firefighting program, such as the number of participants, in its annual report. In South Dakota, the state said it would be difficult to provide accurate data even on the number of people in the program. And in New Mexico, Gonzales planned to dig through cardboard filing boxes to unearth data about the program's history.

Of all states that operate such programs, only Oregon and Colorado were able to readily provide data on recidivism rates for their firefighting programs. In Oregon, from 2015 to 2018, fire crew participants were arrested at a rate 17 percent lower than the general incarcerated population, and reincarcerated at a rate 2 percent lower than the general incarcerated population. The trend was the opposite in Colorado, where fire program participants had a higher recidivism rate, though the Department of Corrections said the low number of participants in its program “dramatically impacts” the calculations. (In 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, there were only 12 fire program participants released).

Quintero, who fought the Carr Fire in California and is now fighting fire with the Inmate Work Program for the second time, says he was ready to start work on the outside as soon as he was released a few years back. After completing a physical agility test with one of New Mexico's forestry districts, he was hired as an on-call firefighter and went back to his hometown to wait. He didn't end up getting tapped at all that summer, and then he violated his parole.

“I was ready to just jump right in,” he says. “But it didn't work out that way.”

Another man on the New Mexico crew, Joseph Coon, had also been through the program before. Coon said the conditions of his parole, including where he was allowed to travel, made it difficult to pursue firefighting on the outside. Several other men in the program said that though they wanted to work in fire when they're released, those options would depend on the flexibility of their parole.

“It makes no damn sense,” says Amika Mota, the policy director at the Young Women's Freedom Center, an organization that works with people who've interacted with the criminal justice system. “If you are putting people in jobs during incarceration that allows us to build these skillsets, then we have to be able to be funneled into using those when we get out.”

Mota fought structure fires in California for more than two years while incarcerated. The barriers formerly incarcerated firefighters face are by design, she says — intrinsic to the carceral system.

And because people of color are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population, policies impacting incarcerated firefighters hurt communities of color more than others.

The programs have garnered increasing scrutiny in recent years, at least in the states where they're most visible. Criticisms often surround three elements of the programs.

First, the pay, as for all prison jobs, is low. In some states, incarcerated firefighters earn close to \$1 per hour. In Georgia, they are paid nothing. But in some states, like New Mexico, firefighters earn more than other prison workers, which helps drive interest in the program. Federally employed, non-incarcerated wildland firefighters earn at least \$15 an hour, and policymakers are working to increase those wages to improve retention as climate change challenges fire management.

Second are the barriers that confront the formerly incarcerated when they reenter society. While many states give people cash upon their release from prison to help jumpstart their new life, it's rarely enough to make a significant difference. California, according to reporting by the Marshall Project, is a state on the high end of those payments. It gives people \$200, and the figure hasn't changed since the 1970s. Some states also escrow money from a firefighter's meager salary, squirreling it away for their release. Jaramillo was able to save thousands of dollars fighting fires while in prison — at the time, enough to make him feel like the richest man in the world, he says — and it helped him when he got out. But many incarcerated people are also disbursing money for restitution payments to victims and spending money on phone calls and food, so not everyone can save up.

Being able to find work and afford a life on the outside has been shown to reduce recidivism. And even in states like New Mexico where formerly incarcerated firefighters seem to be encouraged to move into similar jobs post-release, making those connections and navigating the system is left to the individual. In states like California, legal barriers have kept trained firefighters from joining the state's ranks. A California law signed in 2020 was meant to lower those barriers by permitting incarcerated firefighters to apply earlier for expungement of their records, allowing them to obtain the Emergency Medical Technician license required for firefighting jobs with the state. But Mota says the expungement process remains incredibly difficult.

“If you do not have legal support and a team of people working with you, it's going to be a lot to take on ... and really unrealistic for a lot of people that are focusing on the very basics of survival, which is housing and reuniting with your kids and getting a paycheck,” she says. “Expungement is usually not at the top of the list of concerns when people come home.”

Finally, there's the issue of consent. While states typically describe the programs as voluntary, some scholars and advocates question whether that's always true: Incarcerated people are often required to work, and can receive punishments — including extended sentences — for refusing to comply.

But the programs also offer benefits, and some people work months or years to gain approval to join them. In some states, such as California and Colorado, firefighters can earn days off their

sentences for fighting fires. And working in the programs, whether they're separate camps or just day trips from the prison like in New Mexico, means leaving facilities that are both restrictive and dangerous. Living in a fire camp is "infinitely more humane" than prison, says Matthew Hahn, who worked as a firefighter while incarcerated in California.

Mota, who says that California's reliance on incarcerated firefighting is problematic and that the structure of the programs is designed to keep incarcerated people locked out of opportunities like future employment, also worries that criticisms could lead to their dissolve.

"I do not think these programs should be gone," she says. "That's actually been a fear of mine for many years about talking about the harder parts of this."

The blanket of snow on the ground is so thick driving into New Mexico's Santa Fe National Forest on a recent January day that Gonzales is worried the crew carrier won't make it up the road. It's been a few hours since the pre-dawn hustle to get the firefighting crew packed, and the sun is now up. It sends glints of light off the snow as the crew's heavy vehicles snake their way up the mountain.

The work camp program is headed to a prescribed burn, a planned fire where piles of brush are set ablaze to manage vegetation. Controlling burns like this one requires careful planning, and today's conditions in New Mexico — windless with inches of snowpack — means the fire is less likely to creep and grow.

When the crew arrives in the canyon, U.S. Forest Service employees have already been working the burn for a day. Today's task requires lighting up "slash," a forester's term for piles of branches. After a forest has been thinned with chainsaws, burning the slash reduces the fuel and canopy cover, depriving future fires of vegetation that help it spread out of control.

The men will hike a mile up a steep canyon and light piles of slash that span hundreds of acres. They'll carry drip torches: red canisters filled with a mix of diesel and gas that pools onto a lighted wick.

The group loosely gathers around Fabian Montaña, a Forest Service employee with camouflage boot protectors zipped over his uniform. The crewmates have traded out their oranges for red, fire-proof gear, but their clothing is still emblazoned with their status: "IWC Inmate New Mexico State Forestry." Montaña warns the men to watch their footing in the knee-deep snow and asks them to keep an eye out for one another, the day's still air means they'll likely be sucking smoke as they work.

"Definitely going to need lighters, man. I fell a few times — quite a few times — and the wick went out," says Montaña. "You don't want to have to climb back down."

"These guys are not supposed to have lighters," says Gonzales. In prison, they're contraband. Another work camp program employee jokes that the crewmates can make them on their own; all they need is a battery. Instead, the men are told to hike back to already burning piles to relight their torches.

Soon, the men line up at the trailhead with Quintero at the helm. Eric King, a soft-spoken inmate with a neck tattoo who's the crew's squad boss, brings up the end and calls for a count. After a bit of jostling and a chorus of "moving line," the men start their hike. Their red clothing bobs starkly against the blindingly white, sunlit snow.

Indigenous people have managed land using controlled burns for thousands of years. It wasn't until the U.S. Forest Service came along in the early twentieth century that the technique fell out of favor in wide swaths of the country. In recent years, after urging from Indigenous groups (including some to whom burning is a cultural practice) and pressure from scientists, more state and federal agencies appear to be coming around to the idea that controlled fires can be a tool in preventing large, deadly conflagrations. In 2019, state forestry agencies intentionally burned more than 10 million acres, an increase of nearly 30 percent from 2011, according to data gathered by the National Association of State Foresters. In 2021, New Mexico and California passed legislation intended to make it easier for private landowners to pursue prescribed burns by reducing their liability, and federal lawmakers have also introduced legislation supporting them.

But prescribed burns and forest management alone are unlikely to rein in an onslaught of wildfires, as climate change leads to warmer temperatures, uneven precipitation, and more frequent drought.

The national forest in New Mexico shows those scars already. Montaña points out trees that were toppled over by their own weight because they were full of moisture but weak at the root. This year, wind whipped through the canyon and snapped other trees, made brittle by dry conditions, at the trunk.

The Southwest will become warmer and more arid due to climate change, but all the ways in which fire activity will shift there are not fully understood. By the end of the century, the United Nations expects the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires to increase by more than 50 percent worldwide.

"Fire behavior is changing," said Michael Crimmins, a climate scientist at the University of Arizona. "We're in real time just trying to make sure we understand how those changes are evolving."

And it's not just fire that's changing. People are increasingly moving into what's referred to as the "wildland-urban interface," where human development overlaps with what had been wilderness. With more people living there, building homes in the crags of California's Sierra Nevada and near New Mexico forestland that locals call the bosque, fires are threatening modern development more often. An exhibit at the Smokey Bear Museum in Capitan strikes a scolding tone over the trend: "For many years now, many people have built homes in or near the forest. The new residents generally do not consider the possibility of wildfire." Smokey recommends establishing a defensible space of unburnable material around your home. Some Californians have taken to papering their houses with aluminum wrapping that looks like tinfoil to protect them from flames.

“Instead of fire season, now we think of a fire year mentality,” said Beth Ipsen, a spokesperson for the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), which coordinates national response to wildfire. “There’s typically going to be a need for wildfire response somewhere in the country throughout the year.”

That will likely lead to more difficulties and troublesome health implications for firefighters. In addition to the dangers associated with live fire, firefighting has been linked to heart disease and cancer as well as suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder. Wildland firefighters must navigate exhausting red tape in filing workers compensation and healthcare claims, on top of wages that many describe as inadequate. “The seasons are longer, and we’re not being treated any better,” one firefighter told Reuters last year.

New Mexico’s incarcerated firefighting program is also constantly dealing with much more demand than it can handle. “These guys get pulled every which way,” says Montañaño at the burn site. “It’s like ‘Hey, we need ‘em.’ ‘No, we need ‘em.’ We have to flip coins sometimes.”

Those in the program are aware of these pressures. “Because of the situation with climate change, and the shortage of workers right now, they need us more than ever,” says Nicholas Tanner, an IWC worker, on a break from working on a project in the bosque.

This year’s wildfire season has already been a devastating one in New Mexico, with hundreds of thousands of acres burned and an emergency disaster declaration from the Biden administration. A prescribed burn in the Santa Fe National Forest that blazed out of control started one of the largest fires. And, at the moment at least, the Inmate Work Camp program is not able to help; after the April walk-off, the Department of Corrections paused the program to re-assess security protocols.

Outside the Smokey Bear Museum in Capitan, a wooden path leads to the grave of the real-life Smokey. After spending more than two decades at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. inspiring generations of school children as “a living symbol of wildfire prevention,” the bear died of old age. His body was returned to Capitan in 1976, where it was buried in the park’s yard during a 3 a.m. ceremony engineered to avoid threats of someone kidnapping the body.

Further down the path kneels a bronze statue of a wearied firefighter. His downturned head rests in one hand. The other hand leans on his helmet, which is sitting on the ground, for support. Next to him, a pair of empty work boots sit on a log, near an ax and a tightly coiled fire hose. The Wildland Firefighter Foundation dedicated the memorial, which honors firefighters killed on the fire line, in 2019. A nearby sign urges visitors to “remember the men and women that run into danger as others run away.”

Author’s note on language:

Throughout the course of my reporting, the people I interviewed — including those currently and formerly incarcerated and those never incarcerated — at times referred to currently incarcerated people as “inmates.” Where possible, I have tried to use phrases like “incarcerated people” in order to center the humanity of these individuals rather than framing their identity as

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