



Bureau: Bureau of Land Management

BLM-New Mexico: Veterans Work on BLM Lands Projects

The eight of them live in a wall tent with a wood burning stove. They eat their meals together and roll out sleeping bags at night.

They work more than 10-hour days cutting invasive, thorny Russian olive trees. Russian olive trees grow mostly in riparian areas where they choke out desirable native vegetation such as cottonwood trees and willows.

“I feel like they’re my type of people,” said Sean Frey, a crew leader for the Veterans Fire Corps. “We share similar experiences.”

That’s because they are all veterans of the armed forces. Frey is a U.S. Navy veteran and members of his crew working on public land west of Navajo Dam are veterans of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. The Bureau of Land Management Farmington Field Office, through an assistance agreement with the nonprofit Southwest Conservation Corps of Durango, provides federal funds for the Corps to be the fiscal agent for job training for veterans.



BLM-New Mexico is proud to employ two Veterans Fire Corps groups through an agreement with the Southwest Conservation Corps. For more information about this valuable partnership, visit www.sccorps.org.



Kevin Peterson of the Veterans Fire Corps cuts a tree on BLM-administered land, northeast of Aztec in preparation for a controlled burn. Photo by BLM.

“They have hundreds of hours on the chainsaws,” Frey said, explaining that his crew began work August 17 and will disband Nov. 16. “So the timing is good if they come back in January, when they have a good chance of getting a firefighting job in the spring (with a federal agency).”

Another Veterans Fire Corps crew of six is working on BLM land in Largo Canyon southeast of Blanco, thinning pinon and juniper trees as part of a land health improvement project.

Frey's crew was camped last week at the BLM's Simon Canyon Recreation Area on the San Juan River below Navajo Dam. The close quarters of the tent adds some warmth, said Marine veteran Zachary Cole, about Navy veteran Marco "Mondo" Rivera being the first thing he sees every morning.

"I'll wake up and he'll open his eyes, and his face will be right there," Cole said. Cole was making light about life in the tent as the crew took a break from work in Mud Canyon northeast of Aztec, where the BLM sent them for a day to make burn piles out of pinon and juniper tree debris left over from a thinning project. Listening to Cole's joking made for smiles and good natured laughs among the others.

"Our skills in the military are suited for this type of work," said Army veteran Kevin Peterson. "It's discipline, it is camaraderie. You feed off other people and everybody looks out for everybody else."

Sarah Scott, a BLM natural resource specialist who helped plan the Veterans Fire Corps projects, said they have multiple benefits.

"I love this program and working with these guys. They're gaining valuable skills that may give them an edge in pursuing a career with the federal government while good projects are getting done on the ground."

Crew member Raja Prabhala served in Iraq with an air defense battery of the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division when the division captured Saddam Hussein. Prabhala used the GI Bill to get a degree in archaeology at Boise State University, but it didn't get him a job. He's enthusiastic about his work with the Veterans Fire Corps possibly leading to other employment opportunities with the federal government.

"I'm hoping that this program accentuates my skills as a veteran, along with my education," Prabhala said. "Three months ago I wouldn't have expected to get a job with a federal agency."

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