

# INCARCERATED FIREFIGHTERS

**2020's intense wildfires, coupled with a global pandemic, exposed the state's heavy reliance on incarcerated firefighters and led to better opportunities for these firefighters upon their release.**

**In 2020, 9,917 fires burned through 4,397,809 acres of California land: 4% of the entire state.**

This included the August Complex Fire, California's first "gigafire," which burned over 1 million acres. Some of those who fought this fire were inmate firefighters, who have worked in this capacity since the 1940s.

**Approximately 3,500 inmate firefighters serve California in a typical year, making up 20% of the state's firefighters and saving the state 100 million dollars annually.**

Incarcerated firefighters make \$2-\$5 a day, with an additional \$1 for actively fighting fires. While this is well below the state's minimum wage, it is the highest paying position for incarcerated individuals.

The job is competitive, as it provides inmates access to the outdoors and better accommodations in the conservation camps than in most prisons. Importantly, many incarcerated individuals feel they are a productive part of society.

**"I THINK THERE'S AN ELEMENT OF REDEMPTION THAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE A PRISONER FIREFIGHTER, BECAUSE YOU'RE GETTING THANKED...EVERY TIME WE SHOWED UP AT A FIRE AND THE PEOPLE THERE SAW US, I'M CONVINCED WE CHANGED AT LEAST ONE MIND."**

**– Matthew Hahn, an inmate firefighter, in an interview with the Marshall Project**



Incarcerated firefighters spray down a hotspot at the Rim Fire in the Stanislaus National Forest in California, September 3, 2013. U.S. Forest Service photo by Mike McMillan. Courtesy US Department of Agriculture.

**While incarcerated firefighters receive the same training as civilian firefighters, only 3-5% had been able to secure jobs as firefighters upon release.**

The 2020 disasters were a catalyst for reform. The extensive fires brought attention to incarcerated firefighters' labor, and the lack of a pathway for those firefighters to get jobs in fire departments once released.

**"I COULD BE OF MORE ASSISTANCE. SO THE NEWS [ABOUT AB2147] IS HUGE, AND IT'S NOT ONLY HUGE FOR ME, IT'S HUGE FOR THE COMMUNITY I SERVE, BECAUSE WITH ME BEING AN EMT, I COULD DO MORE."**

**– Michael Gebre, an inmate firefighter, in an interview with NPR**

To address this disparity, California passed Assembly Bill 2147 in 2020, giving inmate firefighters the opportunity to have their criminal records expunged in order to qualify for an EMT certification.\* This certification is required to work at a municipal fire department in California.

\* Those convicted of specified violent felonies (including murder, rape, arson, or sexual offenses, among others) are ineligible.