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News - Wednesday, August 25, 2004

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Serving time, the community

Sentences spent clearing private land of fire fuels

By **COURTNEY LINGLE**

CourtneyLingle@coloradoan.com

As local authorities work this week to thin fire fuels near remote mountain homes north of Fort Collins, help from an unusual source is increasing productivity and cutting costs.

Eighteen midweek clients from Larimer County's Alternative Sentencing Unit spent the day Tuesday stacking wood and piling branches on a hillside in the Glacier View Meadows subdivision, 15 to 20 miles west of Livermore.

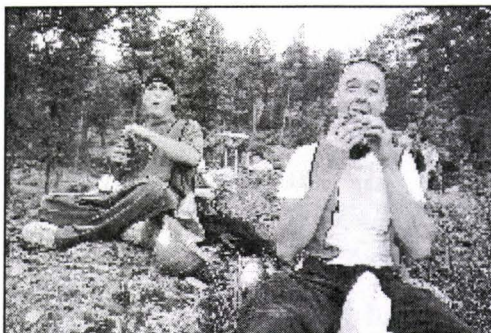
Serving time for nonviolent crimes such as drinking and driving, the all-male crew followed four professionals from the Colorado State Forest Service and Larimer County Sheriff's Office Emergency Services as they sawed through trees and brush on private land.

"These guys are fast," said Justin Whitesell, an emergency services specialist for Larimer County. Finishing up his lunch,



Rich Abrahamson/The Coloradoan

HELPING HANDS: Chris Ressler clears land Tuesday with a crew of 17 others serving time with Larimer County's Alternative Sentencing Unit. The fire mitigation project at Glacier View Meadows subdivision, about 30 miles northwest of Fort Collins, aims to clear about nine to 12 acres to decrease fire danger.



Rich Abrahamson/The Coloradoan

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Whitesell picked up his chain saw to take down a dry, dying tree.

BREAK TIME: Alternative Sentencing Unit participants Jesse Parsons, left, and Chris Ressler break for lunch while serving time in the community rather than in jail.

Scheduled to return again today, the crews were clearing what wildland firefighter Ron Hill said was one of the most dangerous fuel areas in Larimer County.

Just north of the area where the Picnic Rock Fire burned 8,900 acres of forest and grassland earlier this spring, the Glacier View Meadows subdivision consists of steep and densely wooded slopes.

Dave Farmer, a forester with the Colorado State Forest Service, was grateful for the help of 18 extra bodies at no cost to the county or the forest service.

"It's great," he said. "If the folks that were cutting had to pile slash, it would probably take four to five times as long."

Sentenced by the courts to the Alternative Sentencing Unit, or ASU, people participating in the midweek and weekend programs do their time in the community instead of serving it in jail. Spending two days a week in the overnight program, the "midweekers" on the mountain said they've paid their penance doing everything from shoveling horse droppings to building playgrounds to stringing fences.

"It's useful time spent," said Richard Worten, 47, of Loveland, who was sentenced to the ASU for domestic violence. "It's better than putting people in jail."

Toiling beneath an overcast sky, the fire mitigation crew was one of six midweek crews doing community service Tuesday around Larimer County.

Last year, ASU crews provided 85 Larimer County and nonprofit agencies with 94,190 hours of labor. Based on a \$5.15 minimum wage, that amounts to \$485,078.50 in reduced labor costs to those agencies, according to the Larimer County Sheriff's Office.

With an average of 160 "workenders" each weekend, 100 to 115 midweek participants and 25 to 40 people in its new "combo" program that blends weekend and weekday sentences, ASU expects to significantly increase its output this year, program director Dana Hersch said.

Compared with a day in jail, which costs the county about \$66 per inmate, a day in the ASU is cheap, Hersch said. The county pays \$12 per inmate per day in the alternative program.

"I don't think the community's aware of how much gain ASU brings,"

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Larimer County Sheriff's Office spokesman Craig Kern said, noting the program benefits taxpayers, community organizations and inmates.

"The benefits for these guys is they don't have to do straight time," said Kirk Kearney, an alternative sentencing specialist who supervised Tuesday's fire mitigation crew. "I would say most feel like they've been given a break."

Rolling a log alongside 25-year-old Chris Ressler, Jesse Parsons, 22, said the work isn't easy, but it's not too bad either.

"I can think of worse things to do," said Parsons, of Fort Collins.

Tuesday's effort was twofold -- to reduce fuel and to improve the health of the forest by removing trees infested with dwarf mistletoe, a slow killer that starves trees by stealing their water and nutrients, authorities said.

Organized by the Glacier View Fire Protection District and partially funded by the Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership, the project is one of many along the Front Range intended to reduce the risk of wildland fire and the threat to homes in the wildland-urban interface.

"A collaborative effort is the only way it really works," said Tony Simons, a wildfire safety specialist for Larimer County. "It's being creative using the limited dollars the most effective way we can."

Originally published Wednesday, August 25, 2004

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Larimer County News Release

CONTACT: Cpl. Craig Kern, Larimer County Sheriff's Office
(970) 498- 5207 or 5189

DATE: August 20, 2004

SUBJECT: Alternative Sentencing Wildfire Mitigation Project

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Larimer County Sheriff Office's, Alternative Sentencing Unit, will be assisting the Colorado State Forest Service and Larimer County Emergency Services in fuels reduction and the promotion of good forest health around Glacier View, an area just north of the 8900 acre "Picnic Rock" wildfire, which occurred this past March. This project will be Tuesday and Wednesday, August 24 and 25, from 11:00A.M. till approx. 4:00 P.M., weather permitting. The location is at the end of Sniktau Court.

Directions for interested media are; Hwy # 287 North to 74E (Red Feather Lake Road) take it to Glacier View Gate 8. Turn left onto Green Mountain Drive, stay on it as it makes a hard left at the intersection with Champion Drive, continue on Green Mt. Dr. past Mt. Alice and Grouse Mt. Courts to Sniktau Crt. There you turn right, go to the end and park.

A crew of 15-17 'midweekers' will be assembled at the Larimer County Detention Center after their 8:00 A.M. check in. ASU staff will bus them to the site where they will stack wood cut by Larimer County Emergency Services personnel. This is coordinated by the Larimer County Planning Department through the Wildfire Safety Program and funded by a State of Colorado grant. This is a joint project of Larimer County and the Colorado State Forest Service for wildfire prevention.

Alternative Sentencing crews have provided 85 Larimer County and various non-profit agencies with 94,190 hours of labor in 2003. Based on \$5.15, as a minimum wage, this amounts to \$485,078.50 in reduced labor costs for these agencies.

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