

Outdoor labor inspires teamwork

Young members of state's 11 corps "bust their tails" to help communities

By Electa Draper
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Kyle Smith, 18, of Seattle cuts a pine tree Monday in the Florida Mesa area of La Plata County, where a crew of young people with the Southwest Youth Corps is helping to thin forests to reduce fire fuels. The program is one of more than 100 nationwide. (Post / Shaun Stanley)

Durango - Eli Shank, an 18-year-old from Portland, Maine, was a little anxious heading out into a ponderosa pine forest on Florida Mesa with a chain saw Aug. 24, his first day in the field with the Southwest Youth Corps.

"It was hot today. It was hard work. I was nervous going in, but I actually enjoyed it," Shank said while cleaning his saw at the end of the shift. "I'm a hard worker."

Those who don't like hard work "don't last long," said crew boss Seth Stransky.

The Durango-based crew of young people ages 16 to 25 is thinning



Corps members start their day with a team huddle. They are, from left, Michael Right, 20, of Miami; Kyle Smith, 18, of Seattle; and Eli Shank, 18, of Portland, Maine. (Post / Shaun Stanley)

forests to lessen fire hazards near neighborhoods and gas wells. An upcoming project will entail removal of an invasive plant species, Russian olive, from a local landscape. Sometimes crews improve trails at national parks or on the state's 14,000-foot mountains. Sometimes they help restore stream banks.

"It's a great training and education opportunity in regions where it can be difficult for young people to find work that really makes a difference," program director Chris Nessel said.

Nancy Berry, a trails program manager with the San Juan Public Lands Center, said contracting with the corps for labor has been a mainstay for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management for about five years. It is economical for financially strapped federal agencies because the corps also is supported by educational grants, she said.

The local program, one of 11 in the state, enrolls roughly 120 young people a year. It provides shelter, food, stipends (roughly minimum wage) and, for some, college scholarships. In return, the corps members "bust their tails" on projects that benefit the whole community, said board chairman Greg Loheit.

Loheit said probably a majority of the young people involved are considered "at risk" for some reason, usually socioeconomic.

"But it's not a treatment program," he said. "It's a program for kids who need work experience. And they learn to live and work as a team."

The state's 11 youth corps, and the more than 100 nationwide, are direct descendants of the Depression era's Civilian Conservation Corps, which employed 6 million young men to build national park buildings, trails and many other public amenities that still define the character of some of America's most cherished places.

The idea of the CCC, disbanded in 1942, lived on in the public imagination and inspired the creation in 1957 of the Student Conservation Association. That program was the model in the 1970s for the Youth Conservation Corps. But a national program was virtually eliminated in 1981 because of federal budget reductions, although many states and some private foundations carried on with similar programs.

Then President Clinton and Congress revived federal support for such service groups in 1993 and created post-service educational benefits through the AmeriCorps program.

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