



Veteran Fire Corps Provides Job Skills to Veterans in Forest and Wildland Fire Management

The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy is a national collaborative effort to bring a broad cross-section of stakeholders together to address wildland fire management challenges. The Strategy directs wildland fire planning activities and has three primary goals: restore and maintain landscapes, develop Fire-Adapted Communities, and improve wildfire response.

Activity	Impact
# Veterans involved in project in 2018	8
Approximate number of acres improved/restored at De Soto National Forest	6080
Approximate number of project hours worked	1960

Project Overview

Over a twelve-week period during January and February 2018, eight veterans took part in a new program aiming to provide job skills, the Veteran Fire Corps. The three-month program trains veterans in prescribed burning, fighting wildfires, and forest management. While in the program, Corps members received a weekly stipend to cover basic expenses and, upon completion, gained experience and certifications necessary to obtain jobs in the forest industry or fire management.

The Veteran Fire Corps members began their service by attending the Tennessee-Kentucky Fire Academy where they received the coursework necessary to receive their Red Cards, qualifying them to work in jobs along a fire line. Next, they worked over three multi-week stints in the De Soto National Forest in Mississippi to obtain on-the-ground training in forest and wildland fire management. They worked in two priority restoration areas at De Soto, longleaf pine forests and pitcher plant bogs. Corps members helped

conduct a few prescribed burns in the longleaf ecosystem area and removed small diameter overstory pines in the pitcher plant bog restoration area (for habitat improvement). All the chainsaw experience veterans gained in the pitcher plant bog priority area enabled them to safely practice what they learned in their S-212 chainsaw training at the Academy.

Following the conclusion of the fire academy course, Corps members took their Pack Test, a test used as an endurance indicator for wildland firefighting readiness. Following successful competition of the Pack Test, veteran graduates received their Red Cards and S-212 certifications, credentials necessary for applying to jobs in wildland firefighting. All eight Corps crew members, or 100%, found employment with one of several employers following completion of the program, including the Southwest Conservation Corps, Kaibab National Forest, USDA Forest Service in Idaho, National Park Service in Dinosaur National Monument, and an independent contractor.

Success stories highlight regional wildland fire accomplishments that support implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy in the Southeast. The stories demonstrate how the Southeast is improving its "fire resiliency" through technology, education and outreach, forest management, collaboration, and more. Success stories also serve as a model for other communities to follow.

Veteran Fire Corps members enabled critical habitat restoration projects to occur at the De Soto National Forest, while helping increase national and regional wildland firefighting capacity. The Corps not only provided jobs to veterans but also served to introduce younger generations to forest and fire management careers. The Veteran Fire Corps program created a way for veterans to transfer their military skill sets to a civilian job. Corps members expressed being attracted to the program because it was an all-veteran cohort that provided camaraderie and comfort, allowing for a smoother transition into civilian life.

The Veteran Fire Corps project was initiated and managed by the Southeast Conservation Corps with funding through The Nature Conservancy and The Corps Network from a grant by the National Fish and Wildlife Federation. This grant was ultimately supported by recovery funds from the 2010 Deep Horizon BP oil spill with a goal of supporting sustainable natural resource management of the Gulf Coast geographical region. Several partners were involved in providing foundational support for the Veteran Fire Corps project, including the DeSoto National Forest, Land Trust of the Mississippi Coastal Plain, and St. Joseph Bay State Buffer Preserve. The 2018 Veteran Fire Corps was a one-year funded project, but organizers are currently seeking additional funds to continue the program.

Inaugural Corps members shared their experiences working in the Veteran Fire Corps:

“One of the big pushes of this program is to take post-9/11 veterans and have us be the catalyst for these federal positions within the wild land fire community. The idea of being outside and protecting the environment — and more importantly the people — it’s kind of romantic in a way, if you think about it,” Alex Neny, VFC Crew Member

“I have always wanted to be a wildland firefighter throughout my service and saw the VFC as an opportunity for getting certifications and experience to help jump start my new career. I feel that this a great program for veterans to help them start new careers while giving back to the communities that we work for.”- Rachel Shyu, VFC Crew Member

Lessons Learned

- Ensure that wildland fire training is set up ahead of time so required training can begin at the start of the program.
- Establish any required MOUs with federal agencies ahead of time if seeking to work on federal lands.



Veteran Fire Corps crew member stands by a tree he felled. Credit: Mike Dumas, The Nature Conservancy



Veteran Fire Corps crew member, Ben, fells a tree. Credit: Mike Dumas, The Nature Conservancy



Veteran Fire Corps member, Nick Saporito, working on the fire line. Credit: Southeast Conservation Corps



The entire Veteran Fire Corps hiking to work in the De Soto National Forest. Credit: Southeast Conservation Corps



Veteran Fire Corps members take their Pack Test. Credit: Southeast Conservation Corps



Corps member, Rachel Shyu, following work on a prescribed burn at De Soto National Forest. Credit: Southeast Conservation Corps

Support of the Cohesive Fire Strategy

The Veteran Fire Corps supports the national Cohesive Fire Strategy goals of Improving Wildfire Response (training and certifying new wildland firefighters) and Maintaining and Promoting Resilient Landscapes (performing restoration work at the De Soto National Forest and training new natural resource professionals to enter the field with on-the-ground restoration and forest management experience). This success story also supports the Southeast Regional Cohesive Fire Strategy Action Plan by:

- Supporting efforts to increase prescribed burning for ecosystem restoration (1.1.7);
- Train, develop, and increase state, federal, Tribal, and local agencies and cooperating entities capacity for wildland fire management to ensure staffing levels meet operational needs. Utilize training academies and improved MOUs to increase response capacity, including awareness of risk management techniques (3.1.1); and
- Promoting and using fire to emulate natural disturbance patterns to maintain and improve ecological systems, balancing social, cultural, and economic needs, especially over large contiguous landscapes. (1.1.1)

Additional Resources:

Times Free Press Article: <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2018/feb/05/corps-launches-groh-help-veterans-land-jobs-wil/462909/>

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Partners: Southeast Conservation Corps, DeSoto National Forest, Land Trust of the Mississippi Coastal Plain, and St. Joseph Bay State Buffer Preserve, The Nature Conservancy, Corps Network, Tennessee-Kentucky Fire Academy, National Fish and Wildlife Federation



Southern Regional Extension Forestry

