

CYA closure proposed



CYA Counselor Mitchell Tullis has seen how the camp helps youthful offenders.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

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Adult felons may move in

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BEN LOMOND — The Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp could become a minimum-security camp for adult felons under a proposal now being studied by the state.

Facing a budget crisis, the state is looking at cutting programs, and is considering closing down the five minimum-security youth camps that house young offenders and converting them to adult camps.

Youth Authority officials said

Tuesday that the conversion plan is one of three budget-cutting options being considered by state corrections officials. Spokeswoman Sarah Andrade said the other options include making across-the-board cuts in all Youth Authority departments or in laying off staff.

Andrade, however, said the adult camp is the most likely option.

"High level officials are meeting on this now," Andrade said. "No decision has been made yet, and we don't expect to announce a final decision until mid-Sep-

tember."

But workers at the Ben Lomond facility who asked not to be named said they were told by Youth Authority officials Monday that the conversion plan has been given the department's highest priority. The 30 workers at the Ben Lomond camp, which has been in operation since 1947, have been told they will be relocated elsewhere in the state if the conversion plan is approved, workers said Tuesday.

Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey, said he was notified of the proposal only Tuesday, and

has joined with Santa Cruz County officials to write a letter of protest. But the current legislative session ends Friday, and the capitol is caught up in a frenzy of last-minute work.

In addition, Farr said, the governor can convert the camps to adult use without asking permission from local officials.

"They're dealing with state-owned properties and it's an administrative decision," he said. "They don't even have to ask the Legislature."

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Farr's protest has been joined with many others as news of the proposal has leaked out. Corrections officials and elected representatives have reported a surge of calls protesting the closure of the camps.

Opponents of the proposal to close the youth camps charge that the Youth Authority could be killing its most successful program for an insignificant financial savings. If the system's five minimum-security camps are closed, 526 of the Youth Authority's most promising wards would be returned to the system's overcrowded locked facilities to live in dormitories with the more violent and incorrigible inmates.

"This camp is a chance for kids to get out of the gang syndrome," said Mitchell Tullis, a counselor at the Ben Lomond camp. "It's much more cost effective to get to the kids at this level."

There are 8,193 offenders between the ages of 18 and 25 now in Youth Authority facilities, and the system is already crowded to 134 percent of capacity, Andrade said. The Ben Lomond camp, built to house 80, now holds 98.

William Zanella, supervisor of the Ben Lomond camp, said he is not al-

lowed to comment on the proposal. But Robert Butterfield, supervisor of the Washington Ridge Youth Conservation Camp near Nevada City, said the success rate of his wards would "probably drop" if they were moved from the camp to a locked facility.

"This is the most successful program the Youth Authority has," Butterfield said. "It may be somewhat more expensive to run a camp if you don't take into account the community service our wards provide — but this is one of the only programs out there that really offsets its cost in terms of service to the taxpayer."

At wages ranging from \$1 an hour to \$15 a week, Butterfield's 99 wards provided 29,000 hours of community service in three months last year, he said. Services included firefighting, brush clearing, construction, park, river and beach cleanup, and landscaping work. The smaller size of the camps and the incentives of trust and paying work make it easier for the borderline youths to rejoin society, Butterfield said.

"I came here in '69 after a lot of years in institutions, and I'm still here because I think (the camps) offer something closed facilities don't have," But-

terfield said. "I can walk through this place and know people by name, and you can't do that at a bigger institution. It's distressing to find ourselves in this position, it's money driven. It has nothing to do with what we would like to do."

Recidivism rates for young offenders are now incredibly high. A 1988 Commonwealth Foundation study of the Youth Authority system found that 84.3 percent of released inmates were re-arrested within three years. Camp officials and independent observers have concluded that recidivism among graduates of the camps is much lower, but the Youth Authority has no solid recidivism statistics on graduates of the camps, Andrade said.

The first Youth Authority Conservation Camps were founded in 1946, immediately following the end of World War II, and since that time they have served as "the heart" of the state's youth corrections system, Butterfield said. Inmates are carefully screened before they are placed in the camps, and violent criminals do not qualify. The camps are jointly run by the Youth Authority and the Department of Forestry, and wards typically work as firefigh-

ters and in outdoor conservation work.

Five camps are now in operation, but a sixth was closed last year and reopened by the state Department of Corrections as an adult facility. Oak Glen Conservation Camp, located near the town of Beaumont in Southern California, used to house 94 youthful offenders. But as of July 1 the camp houses 134 adult male felons, and has capacity to house 160.

The former inmates of Oak Glen have been moved to other Youth Authority facilities.

The DOC runs 39 adult minimum security camps statewide, according to Lt. Bruce Theriot, supervisor of the Sierra Conservation Center. The DOC has found that the minimum-security camps are very effective for the nonviolent portion of the adult prison population, and is interested in expanding its program, he said.

Youth advocates say the Youth Authority will create more hard-core adult criminals by denying young offenders the recognized rehabilitation opportunities offered in the camps.