

Policing Aptos

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Jason M. Grow — Mercury News

Members of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton have been helping firefighters patrol the streets in Aptos.

Capt. Eric Carlson, right, Cpl. Michael Darby, center, and Gunnery Sgt. Alipio Bando, left, walk down Soquel Avenue. Businesses along

the street, damaged by Tuesday's earthquake, showed signs of slipping down the hill after Saturday's 4.6-magnitude aftershock.

Crooks become cooks when disaster strikes

By Dale Rodebaugh
Mercury News Staff Writer

When natural disasters strike, inmates from California prisons are on the scene almost as quickly as the emergency workers they'll be feeding for the crisis.

"They've been doing this for at least 30 years, going from primitive outdoor facilities to sophisticated kitchens," Lt. Don Clark, commander of the California Conservation Corps camp near Angels Camp, said Sunday.

Clark was at the California Department of Forestry station in Hollister, one of six spots in San Benito, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties where kitchen crews are feeding disaster-relief workers and people thrown out of their homes by Tuesday's earthquake.

Crews come from the conservation camps operated jointly by the California Department of Corrections and the CDF. There are about 50 camps housing 70 to 120 inmates each from San Diego County to Modoc County. Any inmate except those convicted of murder, arson, kidnapping or sex crimes may be assigned to the units.

When there are no emergencies, the inmates perform camp maintenance or are assigned to crews that work for a variety of tax-supported public agencies,

ranging from the National Parks Service to Caltrans to school districts.

"They are in great demand. There are backlogs of up to two years for their services," said Kim Pennington, a battalion chief at the California Department of Forestry station in King City.

When they're called to a disaster, eight-man kitchen crews are on the road in 30 minutes to two hours, Pennington said. They've fed emergency workers and public safety officers — and sometimes evacuees — at floods, fires, earthquakes, oil spills and search and rescue operations, he said.

The mobile kitchens, which consist of grills and ovens, can serve up to 1,200 people a day. They are usually met at the disaster site by companies that have contracted to supply food and water and remove waste, Pennington said.

Crews provide complete, varied meals, plus bag lunches. Breakfasts consist of meat, eggs, potatoes, coffee, juice and bread, while suppers offer meat, vegetables, salad, potatoes or rice and dessert.

Since Wednesday morning, the crew stationed at the CDF headquarters in Hollister have served 2,618 meals at an average cost of \$5.78.

Inmates usually work from six months to two years on a kitchen crew and may be dispatched to five to 10

disasters a year, Clark said.

Although inmates are assigned to the conservation program based on work record and attitude, 98 percent of them want to participate, Clark said.

"We've had very few security problems. There have been only two or three walkaways in the 28 years I've been associated with the program," Clark said.

Frank Silva is one of the inmates who wants to be in the conservation program.

Silva, 41, who was convicted of selling drugs in the early 1980s, is the head cook at the Hollister site. That means he prepares the evening meal and lays out work for the other kitchen crewmen.

"If you make a mistake, you pay for it. I'm trying to make the best of a bad situation," said Silva, who plans to return to the Placerville T-shirt company he and his wife own when he is released in six months.

Frank Jones Jr., 41, is on his first disaster since he joined the kitchen crew three months ago. He served on a fire suppression crew in Chino in 1980.

"It's better to be in a camp (than a prison). It's a better atmosphere and there are better attitudes. This is a chance to give something to the community," said Jones, who has worked as a short-order cook at two Monterey restaurants.