



## Conservation Corps gives youths learning challenge, hard work



Marin Conservation Corps members Frank Zanco (left) and Guillermo Aban remove a fallen tree from San Jose Creek in Ignacio. MCC crews devote at least six months out of the year to clearing and maintaining streams and creeks.

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Staff Reporter

Preserving Marin's natural habitat and physical beauty is something most Marin residents cherish. But to maintain the land requires hard work, determination, and a genuine interest in Marin's open space. One of the groups that works tirelessly year-in and year-out is the Marin Conservation Corps.

The MCC was founded in 1982 as the nation's first local, non-profit conservation corps. Its goal every year, is to provide education and training opportunities to the youths of Marin County.

"This is demanding work," said MCC's Field Operations Supervisor Tim Rusk. "These kids work very hard and are efficient in what they do."

Over the past 13 years, the MCC has provided 1,500 youths with jobs and they have worked on 150,000 acres of public land. Currently, the MCC employs 15-20 youths.

"Actually, the winter season is pretty slow," said Rusk. "In spring, things start to pick up."

The "pick-up" Rusk is referring to is the fee-for-service contracts which the MCC relies on. The contracts come from homeowners associations, park and recreation departments, and the Marin County Open Space District. The MCC takes the contracts, works on the land, and charges for their services.

"We get plenty of respect from companies who hire us," said Rusk. "They know that there isn't a better way to support the community than through us."

Marin County Flood Control Associate Engineer John Wooley is one of the many supporters of MCC's work. Wooley's department has beckoned for MCC services every summer.

"We utilize them every sum-

mer," said Wooley. "They help us with the creek and channel clearing of debris. I don't know if there is another group that is as efficient as they are and would be willing to do that type of work."

The MCC is anxiously waiting for the rainy season to end so they can do their yearly-cleaning of areas where debris has fallen.

"What we do throughout the year is keep streams and creeks free of branches or exposed roots that could affect the flow of the water," said Rusk. "The flow in the creeks have been extremely high this year but with our flood prevention techniques, it has helped the communities."

Some of this year's trouble flood spots were the Ignacio and Santa Ventia areas.

"In Santa Ventia, we have raised the levy in the creek 12-16 inches over the past four years," said Rusk. "This is the first test year for the levy because the previous three years we didn't receive much rain."

Wooley said that property owners must be aware of the land that they own.

"The law says you must maintain the land and creek area that runs through your property," said Wooley. "There is a sizeable proportion of land owners who own parts of creeks in Marin but aren't aware of it. There needs to be more done in informing the public about creek and land ownership."

With the torrential storms that Marin has had in the past few months, the increased vegetation in the county could cause problems when summer arrives.

"There will be more brush and grass development this year," said Rusk. "There will be an increased chance of a major burn this year because of the heavy rains."

The MCC will also provide

fire inspection for residents. The crews were trained by FireSafe Marin, and this will be MCC's first year providing these services.

"We received a grant from Fireman's Fund and we are very excited," said Rusk. "We will be able to recognize potential fire hazards and dispose of them safely."

Rusk noted that although it is early in the year, MCC hasn't received any emergency calls.

"Usually we have two to three calls per year," he said. "If the county feels there is no concern for an emergency, they won't call us for assistance."

Rusk's biggest satisfaction from working at MCC is taking part in the future of tomorrow.

"Working with the Corps members is the best aspect of my job," he said. "These kids are taking advantage of this situation and making the most of it. This is a challenging atmosphere for them and they have an appetite for success."

For the hard work they provide, the young men and women of MCC receive on-the-job training and on Fridays receive a half-day education on tools and equipment. The MCC also provides ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, career counseling, and job search classes.

"I think people conceive us as a convict crew," said Rusk. "We provide kids with many resources they can use. They learn a lot on the job and we are proud of that."

Wooley agrees that programs like MCC are positive role models for the youths and the community.

"This isn't easy work," said Wooley. "I have never seen anything like this. These kids work incredibly fast and extremely hard."