

CAL FIRE and California National Guard join forces for Joint Task Force Rattlesnake



The buzz of chainsaws fills the air, spitting saw dust everywhere as the smell of smoke fills the nostrils and a faint crackle of grassland fire permeates the empty spaces as the whirring chainsaw stops. A team in CAL FIRE yellow scrambles around the dry grass grabbing dry wood, and the member with a chainsaw cuts down dead trees. A fire Captain calls out directions to the handcrew.

You wouldn't be able to tell from appearance that the handcrew members the fire Captain was shouting to weren't CAL FIRE members, but rather they are members of the California National Guard, also known as the California Military Department (CMD). This unit is part of Joint Task Force Rattlesnake, an expansion of CAL FIRE's handcrews fighting fires and participating in fuel reduction projects throughout California.

The mission of Joint Task Force Rattlesnake (JTFR) is to work alongside CAL FIRE to help mitigate and prevent wildland fires through direct fire suppression and fuels reduction projects. The servicemembers go through CAL FIRE training to learn how to operate as handcrew members, effectively and safely assisting in fire suppression and fuels reduction.

The servicemembers are placed on state active duty military orders while they are on JTFR.



A member of JTFR cuts a dead tree for a slash pile during a fuels reduction project prescribed burn.



A JTFR member collects dead wood for a slash pile.

The handcrews operate out of Redding, Mendocino, Nevada City, San Jose, Fresno, Monterey, Camp Roberts and El Cajon.

Currently JTFR has 14 handcrews operating throughout the state. The partnership between CAL FIRE and the CMD expanded in 2019, with the formation of the joint task force. It was formed by an order from the Governor's office ([Executive Order N-05-19](#)) after a particularly devastating fire year. It directed JTFR to assist in the prevention of wildfires in the State of California to assist with the completion of 35 priority [fuel reduction projects](#).

The joint task force initially started with five CAL FIRE/CMD handcrews and treated 1,480 acres that first year.

The following year, JTFR doubled in size and responded to 68 fires as Type II Initial

Attack crews, and treated more than 2,500 acres – proving themselves to be critical assets to fire prevention. A Type II Initial Attack handcrew is trained for clean-up and mop up work after a fire has burned through an area or for widening a containment line.

In 2021, the handcrews responded to more than 90 fires and cleared more than 4,000 acres in fuels management projects. Today, JTFR now has 14 crews available for statewide response and fuels reduction year-round. The crews have also expanded their capabilities by qualifying as Type I handcrews and have demonstrated their ability to aggressively fight fires on top of performing fuels management. A Type I handcrew is a crew that has been trained to be on the active fire line, combatting the fire.

Physical fitness is a huge component of being able to be effective when it comes to fire fighting and fire prevention. The physical fitness standards of military members bring a major advantage in the fight against wildfires.

The mindset of the soldiers and airmen in JTFR when it comes to warfighting capabilities has also translated well to the mental demand of being on the CAL FIRE handcrews attacking wildfires. This, combined with the training and experience CAL FIRE provides the servicemembers, has also proved to be a great hiring path for the Guard members to join CAL FIRE for their civilian careers when their orders are up. Thus, providing CAL FIRE with new, fully-trained fire fighters, and relief from stress for unemployed or underemployed servicemembers. So far, around 100 servicemembers have joined CAL FIRE as a result of JTFR.

The JTFR partnership has proved to be a powerful force in the battle against wildfires. What started as a response to a devastating fire year has blossomed into handcrews dedicated to fuels reduction and fire suppression. The dedication and training of the National Guard members have allowed them to seamlessly integrate into CAL FIRE's operations, expanding their capabilities and bolstering their resources. The success of JTFR stands as a testament to the strength of collaboration and the collective effort in safeguarding California's landscapes and communities from the threat of wildfires.



A JTFR member uses a drip torch during a prescribed burn near Redding, Calif.



Members of JTFR hike on a containment line during a prescribed burn.