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NEWS

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Rocky Mountain Youth Corps Cleans up Mountain Pine Beetle-Infested Trees at Pearl Lake State Park

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. — In June, a 10-person Rocky Mountain Youth Corps chainsaw crew began cutting fallen mountain pine beetle-infested trees into firewood and feeding branches into a chipper at the Pearl Lake State Park campground. The RMYC crew is reducing the amount of dead vegetation available to a fire in the park to make it safer for visitors and help renew the forest.

Similar to its namesake, Pearl Lake State Park is a small water treasure, but the surrounding trees no longer cast a solid green reflection. The green hues of Engelmann spruce and aspen mingle with the red and gray hues of lodgepole pine killed by mountain pine beetles, as well as live trees toppled by the combination of high winds and water-saturated soil. As the trees are lost and the forest begins its renewal process, aspen will regenerate and more forage will be available for wildlife.

The 10 young adults working at Pearl Lake State Park arrived from Steamboat Springs and as far away as Georgia and Maryland and will remain in the area for 11 weeks. After only one week on the project, corps member Jude Ream said, "We already feel like a tight-knit team because we're together constantly." RMYC crews usually work in remote locations so they camp, and their off-hours are spent together. "We were well-warned what we were getting ourselves into," Ream added. Despite the hard work and the once-a-week shower, the crew remains committed to its fuels reduction task.

The crew's demeanor is reflected in an e-mail sent to RMYC from a park visitor that stated, "On Monday, 14 June, at the campgrounds at Pearl Lake State Park, my son and I had the opportunity to meet a crew of your young folks... What a wonderful experience. These folks were working hard, doing a great job and still took time to be friendly to us and tell [us] about what they were doing. They were polite, considerate and a credit to themselves and your organization."

The saw crew is funded by an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sub-grant awarded to the Colorado Youth Corps Association by the Colorado State Forest Service. The CSFS successfully competed for U.S. Forest Service ARRA funds in 2009.

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The crew also is working in Steamboat Lake State Park, located three miles to the west of Pearl Lake. The Steamboat Springs District of the Colorado State Forest Service works closely with the crew to ensure grant specifications are met. State Park personnel also monitor progress and are pleased to see the positive changes in the parks.

Ten independent, accredited youth corps organizations work in Colorado. All corps organizations add an educational component to the work experience. Two RMYC crew members are designated as educational mentors, ensuring that the crew receives 10 hours of educational instruction each week. In addition to earning wages, corps members can earn high school or college credits and an AmeriCorps Education Award to pay for college, trade school or student loans.

Brandon Warren's career path is an example of the opportunities extended to corps members. Warren was part of a youth corps crew for 3 years before moving into field support. In his sixth season with RMYC, he became director of projects. AmeriCorps funds are helping him complete a four-year business degree in computer information systems, and RMYC is supportive of his academic pursuits.

The City of Steamboat Springs Parks and Recreation Department established the RMYC in 1993. The youth corps became a private, nonprofit organization in 1997. Since its inception, more than 1,500 conservation corps participants have contributed more than 275,000 hours toward environmental preservation and conservation projects. This summer, 110 young adults have formed 10 separate RMYC crews and are working on projects spread across northwest Colorado and Wyoming.

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