

# Oregon's Inmate Work Crews

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## Supporting Oregon Communities

Inmates in Oregon have always worked. Inmate labor has been used in a variety of capacities, ranging from making bricks for the first permanent penitentiary in 1866, to milling jute for flax processing, to mining lime for fertilizer. Inmate labor also has supported the operation and maintenance of correctional institutions in areas such as food services, laundry, physical plant maintenance, and janitorial services. Even then, the primary goals were to reduce inmate idleness, reduce costs, and teach work skills to inmates. Sales of products and services were targeted only to government agencies, and profitability was not a primary goal.

## Measure 17 — November 1994

Believing that inmates should work at least as hard as the law-abiding citizens who pay taxes for their support, Oregonians voted, through the initiative process, to require inmates to be at work or in on-the-job training programs 40 hours each week. 1994's Measure 17 began, as follows:

(1)Whereas the people of the state of Oregon find and declare that inmates who are confined in corrections institutions should work as hard as the taxpayers who provide for their upkeep; and whereas the people also find and declare that inmates confined within corrections institutions must be fully engaged in productive activity if they are to successfully re-enter society with practical skills and a viable work ethic; now, therefore, the people declare:

(2) All inmates of state corrections institutions shall be actively engaged full-time in work or on-the-job training. The work or on-the-job training programs shall be established and overseen by the corrections director, who shall ensure that such programs are cost-effective and are designed to develop inmate motivation, work capabilities and cooperation. Such programs may include boot camp prison programs. Education may be provided to inmates as part of work or on-the-job training so long as each inmate is engaged at least half-time in hands-on training or work activity.

— Oregon Constitution, Sec. 41

The mandates of that constitutional amendment, commonly referred to as "Measure 17," became the primary focus of all inmate work and workforce development activities. The measure required the DOC's Inmate Work Programs to operate in a "businesslike fashion," generate revenues for the private sector or reduce the costs of government. It also allowed competition with the private sector. In essence, the department was told to build a viable workforce of inmates workers.

The value of education was specifically identified in Measure 17; in fact, up to half of inmates' full-time work requirement could be satisfied through participation in job preparedness training. The department renewed its emphasis on workforce development activities such as basic education, treatment and training programs related to developing job skills.

OREGON DEPARTMENT  
OF CORRECTIONS

DAVID S. COOK  
DIRECTOR

The mission of the Oregon Department of Corrections is to promote public safety by holding offenders accountable for their actions and reducing the risk of future criminal behavior.

JOHN A. KITZHABER, M.D.  
GOVERNOR



## Compliance with Measure 17

“Compliance” with the mandate now in the constitution is measured as the percentage of inmates meeting that 40-hour-a-week work and/or job preparedness training requirement. Measure-17 implementation requires that inmates’ lives be increasingly centered around their work days, resulting in fundamental changes in the way institutions are run, and challenging the department to do the business of corrections differently.

## Outside Work Crews

In 2000, an average of 575 minimum custody inmates were deployed each day on outside work crews. These crews travel to work sites within a 90-mile radius of their prisons to do manual and skilled labor such as forestry work, parks maintenance, landscaping, building maintenance, clean-up, and other projects for government and private sector customers. Contracts for crews range from a day to several weeks.

Only minimum custody inmates comprise outside work crews. A large percentage of Oregon’s inmates are classified as minimum custody. More criteria are applied before an inmate is eligible for outside work crews (see below). Crews generally consist of a correctional officer and ten inmates.

## The Economics of Work Crews

The DOC’s goal for the use of inmate work crews is to reduce the overall costs of operating government or be used productively by the private sector.

The department developed an accurate system to determine how much to charge for work crews and recoup its actual expenses. The standard rate for a 10-man crew with supervisor is \$400 a day. In the past, some crews have worked for government agencies at reduced rates depending upon General Fund support of the officers who supervise those crews.

Even at the unsubsidized rate of \$400 a day, a DOC study shows that hiring agencies saved \$224 a day over hiring minimum-wage workers (at the pre 1/99 minimum wage of \$6.00 an hour with a 30% benefit/tax rate). Using this formula, the total savings to government by using work crews in FY 1997-98 was nearly \$2 million.

## Work Crew Composition

Inmates assigned to work crews are very low risk. Their assignments are evaluated on a case by case basis and they can be excluded if they don’t meet certain criteria. DOC looks at:

- previous escapes from prison or from a work crew;
- any major rule violations resulting in segregation sanctions;
- whether or not the inmate is a sex offender (including the prior history/nature of offense);
- whether his crime was assaultive or he threatened violence;
- felony detainees (INS, U.S. Marshal, another state);
- any detainer for person to person crime;
- negative psychological evaluation;
- whether inmate is high profile or of significant community interest;
- custody level (must be minimum custody and within three years to a release date).

Communities using inmate labor include Baker City, Salem, Portland, Tillamook, North Bend, Ontario, Umatilla, and their surrounding areas.

Inmate labor is used by the Oregon Department of Transportation, the Oregon Food Bank, local fire departments, State Parks, Department of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, the Military Department, Oregon State Hospital, Port of Bandon, and various local governmental and community agencies.

Of more than 125,000 inmate work crew days in 2000, 14 inmates walked away from custody and all but two have been captured.





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