

Keeping Larch open is well worth it

Larch Corrections Center must be saved from the budget ax. Its community service, fire-safety aid and other benefits outweigh the savings — and penalties — of closure.

Larch is a minimum security prison in east Clark County that is on Gov. Chris Gregoire's list for closure to offset the state's \$2.6 billion deficit. Larch works in coordination with the Department of Natural Resources. Gov. Gregoire should not be the scapegoat. She is directed by the state constitution to balance the budget, and is acting in good conscience. But Larch will be shut down, perhaps by summer, unless she and her administration can be convinced its operation is critical.

It's not hard to prove. That's why Clark County's legislators are fighting to keep Larch open. This 480-bed facility with a staff of 114 is not a place where offenders sit out their sentences behind bars. They are active in serving the community, and rehabilitating themselves toward a useful life.

Larch is the Phoenix that rose in 1956 from the historic ashes of the disastrous 1902 Yacolt Burn that traveled 30 miles in 36 hours and destroyed 238,920 acres of timber. The Dole Valley fire in 1929 consumed another 153,000 acres. The need for trained, certified fire control crews here is obvious. No one wants another Yacolt Burn. This past fire season, Larch crews put out 21 fires.

State officials believe \$12.5 million could be saved in the current budget

cycle by closing Larch, but that figure is offset in reduced firefighting costs, and other inmate services.

The 2009 cost of a 20-member inmate fire crew — \$3,000 per day — is much less than other crews. A private crew costs between \$9,000 and \$15,000 per day. The figures were verified by Rex Hapala, Castle Rock, DNR assistant manager for the Pacific Cascade region. Larch fire crews can be mobilized in one hour to fight a fire in the region. Larch also supports other firefighters with a portable kitchen that can feed 3,000 in the field. A taxpayer savings of \$90,000 is achieved by a Larch crew fighting a 10-day fire, compared with a private crew.

Cost savings

Department of Corrections and DNR employees assembled cost figures in a paper opposing closure. Examples: It costs \$12,217 less per year to house a prisoner at Larch than at McNeil Island (\$29,670). Since 1987, Larch crews have saved taxpayers \$17.7 million while compiling 394,000 hours fighting fires. That's the amount above the cost of a private contractor.

Larch crews maintain the 239,000-acre Yacolt Burn State Forest, returning profits from timber sales to fund road-building and school construction.

Larch crews also help in tree planting



and thinning; assist at the Clark County Fairgrounds; repair Beacon Rock trail and others; assist the Clark County Food Bank and perform stream/salmon work.

Supporting comments:

■ Earl Ford, former president, Clark County NAACP, and legal redress co-chair: "There is probably no other facility like (Larch) in Southwest Washington; it's brought millions in savings to these communities, and it is a place of diversity."

■ Bob Brink, Pomeroy Farm, president, Washington Farm Forestry Association (owner, 500 acres of timberland): "Larch inmates provide a tremendous benefit to the state. They develop work skills that make them more employable."

■ Yacolt Mayor Joe Warren: "Yacolt used inmates more this year than in the past. They helped in a town hall project; brush-clearing and litter clean-up and with special community events. I believe it would be more expensive to close Larch than to keep it open."

■ Tony Meyer, executive director, Lower Columbia Fish Enhancement Group: "Inmates drilled bolt holes into bedrock of Washougal River to anchor logs for fish protection, and worked on other regional rivers. They have saved us millions of dollars over the years, and aided elk habitat."

Clark College has offered automotive training, adult basic education and high school degree instruction at Larch for years, and it's paying off. This year, two inmates won full-ride scholarships to Clark.

Savings and benefits from Larch radiate over a large area. Closure is the wrong decision.

TOM KOENNINGER is editor emeritus of *The Columbian*. His column of personal opinion appears on Wednesdays. Reach him at koenninger@comcast.net.