

youth crew pulls weeds AND SPREADS OPTIMISM

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*Northwest Youth Corps'
South 4 Blue Crew on the
Rogue River-Siskiyou NF*

If you happen to visit the pleasant rural community of Agness, Oregon in early August, you'll likely see sportsmen fishing in the famous Rogue River, groups camping at Oak Flat Campground along the Wild and Scenic Illinois River or hikers exploring Rogue River-Siskiyou NF trails.

This year, a group of eleven remarkable youth descended upon the community with intent and purpose. Instead of pursuing recreation and leisure activities, they had come to the area as members of Northwest Youth Corps' South 4 Blue Crew to work with FS Botanists to dig up Himalayan blackberry, pull knapweed, and learn important life lessons.

Typically with a youth crew, noisy chatter and spontaneous singing may set the mood for the day. These youth, either deaf or hard of hearing, set the mood while working by keeping their eyes out for the "you're it" sign—raised eyebrows and an extended tongue. Whoever was "tagged" had to pass the sign along to other members of the crew scattered across the hillside. This activity ensured they were always looking out for each other and aware of their surroundings. One teammate walked among the crew with a large water jug and with a single hand motion, asked if water was needed. Another youth discovered a salamander and quickly corralled her cohorts for a look and lesson before releasing it away from the work site.

These youth, ages 16-19, joined Northwest Youth Corps' (NYC) five-week American Sign Language (ASL) crew for different reasons. For some, it would be their first job and a resume builder. For others, the youth crew experience would broaden an impressive list of previous experience that included volunteering internationally or breaking wild horses at a family-owned stable. For all, it was an opportunity to be outside, learn new skills and make a contribution. Crew member **Krysta Pardo** said, "It is my passion. I want to be outside doing things that help the environment. I like the hard work out here and I like to help."

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NYC Director **Joe Waksmundski** said, “While learning valuable lessons of teamwork and responsibility, youth gain a sense of pride that comes with hard work and a job well done. Our programs nurture and encourage leadership development, diversity and cultural exchange among the youth and leaders in the program.”

When asked to describe some of the challenges of working on the crew, **Brian Manjarrez** said, “Sometimes you have to get along with people you don’t feel completely comfortable with.” **Katrina Horrell-Schmitz** agreed: “The challenge is how to help each other keep going, and keeping an eye out for poison oak!” **Alani Hunt** acknowledged digging out blackberry bushes was hard work and that her hands hurt. She immediately added she had learned one doesn’t need expensive things like television, internet or nice clothes, and that camping is cool; it is fun and you have all you need.

What does the future hold for crew members? **Greta Smith**, Environmental Coordinator for the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, joined the crew for a day and shared her experiences as a deaf Federal employee. She encouraged crew members to work hard and play hard; the rest will fall into place. In turn, members shared their goals and asked how to navigate the USAjobs website.

These young people have their expansive sights set on the future: Crew member **Kayley Judd** talked about climate change and believes that people will need to adapt—“This need is BIG.” She advocated for building smarter and becoming less dependent on oil. **Isaac Sturgeon** is interested in construction, maybe welding or mechanics, and is confident the job will also be “BIG.”

Two things are certain: These youth made a significant impact as they cleared large swaths of invasive plants above the Agness Guard Station and nearby locations, and the future looks promising for all eleven of these bright, ambitious youth!



The finished NYC blackberry removal project on the Rogue River-Siskiyou NF