

Opening Statement
Chairman Raúl M. Grijalva
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 1612
The Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2009
April 2, 2009

The Subcommittee will come to order.

Today the Subcommittee will hear testimony on legislation I introduced two weeks ago, along with Chairman Rahall, to help repair and restore our nation's public lands while employing and training thousands of young Americans and promoting a culture of public service.

In 1993, when the Public Lands Corps was established through the good work of our late colleague Bruce Vento of Minnesota, there were huge backlogs of labor-intensive work on national park lands, forests, wildlife refuges, historic sites and Indian lands.

Unfortunately, we still face those challenges and more: years of inadequate funding have put these agencies further behind on vital maintenance work while infrastructure continues to crumble. Despite the best efforts of these underfunded agencies, natural and cultural resources have been neglected, and in many places the effects of climate change are magnifying earlier problems such as fire risk, damage by insects and invasive species, coastal erosion and fragmented habitat.

We have started to attack this problem with the recently passed stimulus legislation, but that is only a start. Much remains to be done on public lands.

Our bill, H.R. 1612, will expand and reinvigorate an existing program, the Public Lands Corps, by streamlining its management, modernizing its scope and providing new tools to help the program accomplish its mission.

This legislation not only takes a decisive step forward in finishing desperately needed work on our national park lands, forests, wildlife refuges, historic sites and Indian lands, but also recognizes the important are our coastal and marine systems, and our national marine sanctuaries.

These lands and waters have not previously been eligible for Public Lands Corps projects; our legislation adds authority for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to participate in the program by offering Corps members a chance to work on restoring coastal and marine ecosystems along our oceans and the Great Lakes.

In addition, the legislation adds incentives and encourages the agencies to pursue an aggressive outreach program to attract new participants, especially from underrepresented populations, and prepare them for possible careers in those agencies or in conservation fields.

This expanded public service initiative will introduce people from a greater diversity of social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to our nation's parks, forests and public lands not only as possible future employees but also as lifelong enthusiasts.

The bill also includes language to:

- ensure adequate housing,
- authorize participants in existing volunteer programs to contribute both as mentors and on Corps projects,
- expand the program for college and graduate students, and
- broaden preferential hire provisions.

This legislation takes advantage of an opportunity to provide meaningful employment and training to young people who need it, while also improving the condition of our priceless natural and cultural resources.

I am pleased that President Obama and Interior Secretary Salazar have made national service a priority and I look forward to the comments of our administration witnesses today.

I am proud to have the support of the pre-eminent conservation corps groups, as well as leading national parks advocacy groups, all of whom are here to testify today.

I also want to thank the gentleman from West Virginia, Chairman Rahall, the chairman of full committee, for his support of this legislation. Other members have also indicated their interest in service-learning on public lands, and I look forward to working with them, and with members of the other body who have a long interest in the Public Lands Corps.