

Testimony by Sally T. Prouty, President and CEO, The Corps Network
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 1612, the Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2009
April 2, 2009

Good afternoon Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Sally Prouty and I am the President and CEO of The Corps Network. It is my pleasure to be here today to speak in strong support of Chairman Grijalva's bill, H.R. 1612, the Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2009. I am here on behalf of The Corps Network, the 136 Service and Conservation Corps it represents, and the 26,000 young people who serve in Corps each year.

Mr. Chairman, with your approval, I will submit a more complete statement for the record. In the brief time I have this afternoon, however, I would like to emphasize why this bill is so important:

- It will bring much-needed resources to the tremendous backlog of projects needing to be accomplished on public lands;
- It will increase the utilization of service and service-learning as strategies for accomplishing work on public lands;
- It will introduce more, and more diverse, young people to America's public lands – instilling in them an appreciation for nature, an enjoyment of healthy recreation, and a sense of stewardship for our natural resources and the environment;
- By expanding the non-competitive hiring status of Public Lands Corpsmembers, it will bring youth and diversity to the land management agency workforces and provide additional opportunities for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to pursue good careers in land and natural resource management.
- It will raise the profile of the Public Lands Service Corps (PLSC) within the relevant agencies and establish a PLSC coordinator, making it easier for Corps and other youth service organizations to participate; and
- It will help bring Corps, a proven youth development strategy, to scale.

Service and Conservation Corps

History

As you know, Service and Conservation Corps are direct descendents of the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that provided work and vocational training for unemployed single young men by conserving and developing the country's natural resources. Between 1933 and 1942 when it was disbanded, the CCC employed almost 3.5 million men who planted an estimated 2.5 billion trees, protected 40 million acres of farmland from erosion, drained 248,000 acres of swamp land, replanted almost a million acres of grazing land, built 125,000 miles of roads, fought fires, and created 800 state parks and 52,000 acres of campgrounds. But the biggest legacy of the CCC may have been the hope it provided both the young men and their families.

Today

Today's Corps are a proven strategy for giving young men and women, many of whom are economically or otherwise disadvantaged and out-of-work and/or out-of-school, the chance to have a positive impact on their own lives, their communities, and the environment.

Of the 26,000 Corpsmembers currently enrolled, approximately 55 percent have no High School diploma, 64 percent report family income below the federal poverty level, 30 percent have had previous court involvement and at least 10 percent have been in foster care. Contemporary Corps provide thousands of 16-25 year olds the opportunity to earn a second chance in life through hard work and service to their communities.

In the Corps model, Corpsmembers are organized into crews of six to 10 people to carry out labor-intensive service projects while being guided by adult leaders who serve as mentors and role models as well as technical trainers and supervisors. In return for their efforts to restore and strengthen their communities, Corpsmembers receive: 1) a living allowance; 2) classroom training to improve basic competencies and, if necessary, to secure a GED or high school diploma; 3) experiential and environmental service-learning based education; 4) generic and technical skills training; and 5) a wide range of supportive services. Those Corpsmembers who are co-enrolled in AmeriCorps also receive a Segal Education Award upon the completion of their service.

Most importantly, these young men and women learn to value their personal contribution, and the importance of teamwork. They experience the recognition and pride that comes from making a positive investment in their community.

A Research-Supported Strategy

In February 1997, Abt Associates published a groundbreaking study, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, on the value of youth Corps. The study, "*Youth Corps: Promising Practices for Young People and Their Communities*" used rigorous multi-site random assignment methodology to document key outcomes, including:

- Significant employment and earning gains for young people who join a Corps;
- Positive outcomes that are particularly striking for young African-American men;
- A significant reduction in arrest rates among all Corpsmembers; and
- A significant reduction in the number of unplanned pregnancies among female Corpsmembers.

The study concludes that, "Youth Corps are rare among youth-serving programs in their ability to demonstrate significant and positive impacts on participants."

The Public Lands Corps

Background and Examples

For nearly three decades Service and Conservation Corps have worked in partnership with land management agencies to accomplish important work on public lands. Like the CCC of the 1930s, they have introduced young people to the great outdoors and provided them with various education and economic opportunities.

Presently, the Department of Interior agencies spend between \$5-6 million on nearly 200 PLC projects with Corps annually. This investment in turn, supports nearly 600 corpmembers. Because Corps often bring a match, as well as unpaid volunteers from local communities, much more work is actually being supported.

PLC crews do everything from building trails and wheelchair accessible facilities to providing visitor services and environmental education to local school children. In recent years, due to an intentional focus on wildland fire mitigation, many crews have done a significant amount of hazardous fuels reduction, invasive species removal, and habitat restoration. Some specific examples of these projects include:

For over 15 years, the *Washington Conservation Corps (WCC)* has partnered with Olympic National Park on a variety of fire abatement activities. Each year, WCC crews remove hundreds of downed old growth trees in an effort to reduce fire fuels and increase access.

The *California Conservation Corps (CCC)*, has a dedicated 18-person fire crew that partners with Whiskey Town National Park located outside of Redding, CA. For eight years, under the guidance and training of the National Park Service, this crew has performed controlled burns, removed hazardous fuels and cuts fuel breaks.

The *Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC)*, based in Durango, CO, works with Mesa Verde National Park on wildfire mitigation. Mesa Verde has a significant history of wildfire, especially in recent years. When the Park needed assistance in removing hazardous fuels from key areas in advance of the Park's 100th anniversary celebration, the entire SCC crew received 40 hour chainsaw training and certification

The *Coconino Rural Environment Corps (CREC)*, based in Flagstaff, AZ, thins hundreds of acres of federal, state, county, city, and private lands every year. Much of this wood is then turned over to local Native American communities for firewood.

The Alaska Service Corps (ASC) was tasked with a week-long invasive removal project in one of Alaska's premiere National Parks, Wrangell St. Elias. The ASC crew help eradicate White Sea Clover & other invasive plants from key areas near the Slana Visitor Center. The ASC crews' efforts allow native plants opportunities to reseed and enhance the experience for residents and tourists.

The *Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC)*, based in Grand Junction, Colorado, has been actively involved in Tamarisk removal for several years. The WCCC has partnered with the Colorado State Parks Department and the state Division of Wildlife, the Audubon Society, and the Tamarisk Coalition to control acres of Tamarisk and Russian Olive, Hounds Tongue, Canada Thistle and other species, as well as 15 miles of Salsafy, Russian Thistle, and Storks Bill.

The Need for Expansion

Despite all of the important work currently being supported by PLC funds, much more needs to be done. Estimates of the backlog on public lands (controlled by both the Department of Interior and the Forest Service) now reach up to \$16 billion. In addition, according to the Forest Service,

nearly 200 million acres of public land are at increased risk of catastrophic wildfire and according to the Department of Agriculture, invasive alien plant infestations cover 100 million acres (an area twice the size of Delaware) and are spreading at a rate of 14 percent per year. At the same time, a large percent of public land agency professionals are nearing retirement.

Potential exists in today's young people. They want to give back. The Southwest Conservation Corps, which received 20 applications a week in 2008, is receiving 100 applications a week in 2009. The Coconino Rural Environment Corps is getting three to five times more applications than it has spaces available. Some of the interest is the result of high unemployment—but some is the desire to do work that makes a positive difference for communities and the environment. H.R. 1612 recognizes the need to offer opportunities to those young people, as well as to those who are part of the high school dropout epidemic.

Nearly one-half of minority students and almost one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate with their class. Research strongly suggests that public land opportunities can make a significant difference for these young people. According to a 2006 report by Civic Enterprises, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, dropouts want “real world opportunities” and a more challenging curriculum to keep them engaged in school. A follow up study, *Engaged for Success*, showed that students believe service learning would keep potential dropouts engaged in school. Our public lands can provide such experiences for students in underperforming districts.

Engaging these young people, many of them from low-income and minority communities, can be a way to help to diversify public lands personnel, to develop the ethic of stewardship among these populations, and to attract larger numbers of minorities as visitors, enabling them to embrace their natural patrimony.

Conclusion

The Public Land Service Corps Act would simultaneously address these problems as well as others. Expanded authority would enable PLC work to be done on more public lands. Increased funding would support many more Corpsmembers, reduce the backlog of deferred maintenance projects, and help prepare our public lands for the 21st century.

Meanwhile, the Corpsmembers could, in turn, utilize their AmeriCorps Education awards and the expanded non-competitive hiring authority contained in this bill to pursue careers in land management – thus building and diversifying the next generation of the resource management workforce.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify. On behalf of the entire Corps Network, I again want to express our appreciation and support for HR 1612. We look forward to working with you to see it enacted into law.