

Testimony by Joel Holtrop, Board of Directors Chair, The Corps Network

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT
AND RELATED AGENCIES**

April 10, 2014

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the committee-

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on utilizing conservation corps to complete backlogged public land maintenance, saving money, and providing jobs to out of work youth and young adults. My name is Joel Holtrop and I am the Chair of the Board of Directors of The Corps Network. The Corps Network is the national association of service and conservation corps with over 100 member organizations operating in all 50 states, and enrolling nearly 26,000 young people each year from ages 16-25. It is The Corps Network's mission to provide critical leadership to the Corps movement and to our nation's Service and Conservation Corps as they harness the power of youth and young adults to tackle some of America's greatest challenges and transform their own lives.

I served over three decades with the United States Forest Service, starting as a seasonal employee. I was the lowest graded person on a two-person crew, but enjoyed my work so much that I eventually rose to the Deputy Chief of the National Forest System. I am here today to share with you my true passion and why I feel that the committee should support programs that will help educate and develop the next generation of land managers and resource stewards. Much of the work that we do as conservationists will be in vain if there are not people who appreciate why and how we protect America's treasured places and resources—and this is why I am proud and honored to serve as the Chair of The Corps Network's Board of Directors.

The Corps Network requests the Committee's support for FY15 programs that will allow public land and water management agencies to engage young adults and veterans to meet our nation's backlogged maintenance needs, address record youth unemployment, and prepare a diverse group of youth to be the next generation of natural resource employees.

Corps are comprehensive youth development programs that provide their participants with job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and additional support through a strategy of service that improves communities and the environment. They are a direct descendant of the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps, which mobilized about three million young men who dramatically improved the nation's public lands while receiving food, shelter, education, and a precious \$30-a-month stipend.

Before I begin to detail our request of the committee, I would like to tell you about Chris Thomas, a former Corpsmember with the California Conservation Corps and Veteran having served in the United States Marine Corps in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chris has faced many challenges in his life. He and his three siblings were raised by a single mother, a cervical cancer survivor, who worked three jobs to support the family. During Chris's

four years in the Marines (beginning in 2005), he was wounded twice. He received shrapnel in his chest and was stabbed once, leading to a medical discharge. It was soon after his discharge that he joined the California Conservation Corps (CCC).

Chris first heard about the CCC from a cousin who served as a Corpsmember. The Corps seemed like a logical transition from military-life to civilian-life, but the adjustment was more difficult than Chris anticipated.

“I had anger issues. I was quick to snap. I thought everyone should talk, work, act just like I did. If you didn't, then just get out of my way,” said Chris. “The CCC helped me curb that Marine Corps mentality.”

Through the Conservation Corps, Chris learned how to accept and embrace diversity. His CCC experiences helped him ease out of having only been surrounded by other Marines who shared the same strict lifestyle and discipline. Chris says his background with the Marines taught him the meaning of hard work and gave him the building blocks to be a strong leader. As a Crew Leader with the CCC, Chris led others in planting trees, habitat restoration projects, and fire fuel reduction.

Chris isn't sure what his life would look like today without the California Conservation Corps. He will never be able to forget all the different people he met through the Corps. He says he would love to eventually return to the CCC to help other young people in the way he was helped.

The Impact in Numbers

In 2013 alone, over 100 Corps programs across the country through their collective efforts as members of The Corps Network

- Restored and improved 240,000 acres of ecological habitat
- Maintained and improved 2,900 parks, gardens, and urban greenspaces
- Built and maintained 8,000 miles of trails
- Removed over 300,000 acres of invasive and exotic plant species

Corps Enroll Participants Reflective of America's Diversity

At present, our member Corps enroll nearly 26,000 Corpsmembers a year, the majority of whom come from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, and are looking for a second chance to succeed in life. Many Corpsmembers are “opportunity youth,” meaning that they have either dropped out of school or are unemployed at the time that they enter a Corps program.

In addition to the normal work week, Corpsmembers receive a wide range of personal and professional development opportunities and services including, but not limited to: guidance from adult leaders who serve as mentors and role models, academic programming designed to lead to a high school diploma or GED, opportunities to pursue certificates and credentials with demonstrated value, and a modest stipend – all to prepare them for postsecondary education and labor market success.

In 2012, 65% of the 27,000 youth who enrolled in our programs were unemployed at the time of entry, 31% were not in school and did not have a GED, 61% came from families below the poverty line, and 20% were formerly incarcerated or court-involved. After completing their programs, 54% of alumni said that they were employed or enrolled in further service. 68% reported that they were in college or a high school diploma / GED program.

Quality Work

Each year, Corps complete hundreds of high-quality and often technical projects on public lands and waters. Project sponsors consistently express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of work and productivity of the Corps. Virtually all federal project partners (99.6%) say they would work with Corps again.

Types of work include, but are not limited to:

- Protecting wildlife and improving access to public land and waters
- Preparing communities for disasters and responding when needed
- Enhancing recreation on public lands
- Protecting communities and public lands from the devastating effects of wildfire
- Preserving historic structures
- Enhancing neighborhoods and community public spaces

Cost Savings

By partnering with Conservation Corps, federal land and water management agencies achieve more with their operating budgets. Research conducted by the National Park Service's Park Facility Management Division indicates that hiring Conservation Corps to complete maintenance and trail projects resulted in significant savings.

The analysis considered 15 diverse trail and maintenance projects throughout the country in places including Mesa Verde National Park, Glacier National Park, Point Reyes National Seashore, and Voyageurs National Park. The research found that using Conservation Corps to complete maintenance and trail projects provided a cost savings of over 50%.

FY15 REQUEST

The Corps Network requests the committee's support for FY15 programs that will allow public land and water management agencies to engage young adults and veterans to meet our nation's backlogged maintenance needs, address record youth unemployment, and prepare a diverse group of youth to be the next generation of natural resource employees.

We respectfully request that in FY15 the subcommittee fund the following accounts:

- \$2,283,852,000 for "Operation of the National Parks."
- \$10,000,000 for the "Centennial Challenge" for the National Park Service.
- \$50,600,000 for Department of Interior Youth Programs.
- Increased funding for operational accounts of DOI Bureaus and USFS.

The first two accounts fall under National Park Service and the third is under the Department of Interior. National Park "Operations" is a preexisting account governing operation of our national

parcs and the “Centennial Challenge” is a new program and was also proposed under the most recent Bush administration. These funds will allow thousands of veterans, youth, and others to work upgrading the National Park System for its 100th anniversary in 2016. The Department’s Youth Program funding would also provide work and training opportunities for young people and veterans during 2014 and 2015. A key component of the Department’s efforts will be partnering with youth organizations through the 21st Century Conservation Corps. We also support increased funding for all operational accounts at the other Bureaus (BLM, BOR, and FWS) and at the U.S. Forest Service that could fund partnerships with Conservation Corps.

As the National Park Service prepares for its 100th Anniversary, Congress has an opportunity to invest in the popular and economically important National Park Service. An investment this year will help parks recover from years of underfunding and restore parks for the Centennial. Every dollar invested in the National Park Service generates \$10 in economic activity. The operations investment would provide for park rangers to maintain facilities and provide services to park visitors. The Centennial Challenge investment would allow for the park service to leverage private matching funds through a 1:1 match for specific projects.

Beginning with the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, and continuing to the recent launch of the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Initiative, organizations like California Conservation Corps and Minnesota Conservation Corps have helped millions of young Americans gain job training, further their education, and contribute to America’s communities through service and the conservation of national and state parks, forests, and other treasured places.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, as a career public land manager, I understand how important Conservation Corps are to the missions of the land and water management agencies. The future of our nation’s public lands depend upon the next generation becoming active resource stewards. I hope that you will provide the funding to put thousands of youth, and returning veterans like Chris Thomas, to work restoring some of America’s greatest historical, cultural, and natural treasures. With the approaching National Park Service centennial, billions in backlogged maintenance across all of the land management agencies, record youth unemployment, and the cost savings nature of public private partnerships, this funding is an absolute win-win for our country. Thank you for the time today.