



**Testimony of Kevin Heiner, Regional Director, Southwest Conservation Corps
Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2167, H.R. 2333, H.R. 4387 and
H.R. 5114**

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Chairman McClintock and Ranking Member Tsongas: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before the House Natural Resource Subcommittee on Federal Lands on two pieces of important legislation, HR 2167 and HR 5114. My name is Kevin Heiner and I am the Regional Director for the Southwest Conservation Corps, a program of Conservation Legacy, based in Durango, Colorado. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on these important pieces of legislation.

I am a veteran and served in the United States Air Force from 1996 – 2000 as an Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighter. I was stationed at Prince Sultan Air Force Base in Saudi Arabia to support the mission of enforcing the no fly zone in Iraq between the two Gulf Wars and also at Beale Air Force Base in California, where I served in a structural and wildland fire response capacity as well as in a medical and aircraft rescue response capacity to support the missions of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing and Mission Support Group. The skills I gained in the military supported my career in the civilian sector. Immediately upon finishing the active duty portion of my military commitment, I was hired by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps to serve as a crew leader. This continued my personal and professional commitment to national service, with added elements of youth and outdoor leadership as well as impactful conservation service projects on public lands. I was responsible for building a cohesive crew and for the crew's performance, learning and experience in the outdoors. It was life changing for me and the group I led. Many of those individuals, including me, are still working in the corps or in other fields related to conservation and personal development.

After some time in the private forestry sector, in 2008 I joined the Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) as a Program Director. SCC is a program of Conservation Legacy, a national organization that cultivates local action to produce enduring widespread impact in communities, ecosystems and people. In 2015, Conservation Legacy engaged over 1,200 young people and veterans in paid conservation work completing over 350,000 hours of service enhancing recreation access, protecting communities from wildfire, stewarding conservation resources and enhancing communities. In addition to SCC, Conservation Legacy programs include the Arizona Conservation Corps, Southeast Conservation Corps (TN), Bridge Network (national, based in WV), Environmental Stewards (national) and Preservation Youth Summit (national). The organization was founded in Colorado in 1998 and operates in 45+ states across the country.

In 2009 I was fortunate to be heavily involved in the development of the Veterans Fire Corps (VFC) program at SCC. The VFC is collaborative initiative of Conservation Legacy and other conservation corps run in partnership with state and federal agencies including the USDA Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). VFC aims to engage recent era Veterans on priority hazardous fuels projects while developing the next generation of wildland firefighters.



VFC successfully addresses two needs: 1) veterans who need a way to transition from military to civilian service; and, 2) land management agencies who need highly qualified and well trained employees. VFC builds upon the knowledge, leadership experience, and training of the women and men who served in the armed forces, retraining them and refocusing their mission to protecting our public lands from the threat of wildfire.

Conservation Legacy co-founded the program with Veteran Green Jobs and worked with them to replicate the program to other conservation corps programs including the California Conservation Corps, Montana Conservation Corps, Nevada Conservation Corps, Student Conservation Association, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, and Western Colorado Conservation Corps.

The Model. Veterans Fire Corps targets recent era Veterans, generally between the ages of 23-35. Veterans joining the program receive a living stipend, training, and support while working on projects varying in length from 12-weeks to six months. Training covers the key firefighting areas leading towards a Firefighter Type 2 certification. VFC crews are then mobilized on thinning projects, pile burning, prescribed burns, and, at times, initial attack.

Most applicants applying to the program are searching for a way to transition from the military to civilian world. “Vets speak a common language,” said a former Army interrogator and past participant. He also addressed a more serious issue shared by his crew members. “Most combat vets have problems,” he said bluntly, “and being with other vets helps.” It is this connection that kept one former Marine Corps sniper in the program; he realized that his anxiety around post-traumatic stress seemed to fade the longer he spent living with his fellow veterans among trees and streams.

An ultimate goal of the VRC is to transition its graduates into employment as wildland firefighters. Because many of the VFC crews work alongside agency fire crews, they often are able to network and learn about opportunities locally and make connections with hiring managers long before any job openings are available. More than half of all graduates have found employment in wildland fire; many of the others self-select that fire management is no longer a career goal for them.

Veterans participating in the program received significant training including:

- S-212, Wildland Fire Chain Saws
- S-130/190, Basic Firefighter (red card)
- CPR/First Aid
- Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response Standard (HAZWOPER)
- ICS 100, Introduction to Incident Command System
- ICS 200, Incident Command System for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents
- ICS 700, National Incident Management System
- Emergency Camp Support
- S110, Basic Wildland Fire Orientation
- Job application training



The federal agencies engaged the VFC crews to complete hazardous fuels reduction projects as well as assist with prescribed burn assignments, direct fire response and disaster response. Program graduates obtained positions such as USFS hot shots, USFS engine crew, BLM hand crew, and BLM forestry technicians. The program attracted significant national press including CBS, CNN and the New York Times.

The VFC model is a particularly good fit for veterans transitioning to civilian life due to the similarities between the wildland fire and the military systems and culture:

- Both have a clear structure with line of command;
- Both rely on teamwork and comradery;
- Both are focused on a greater mission and service to country;
- Both teach skills and have clear credentialing;
- Both have clearly articulated career paths; and,
- Both involve hard physical work that provides personal and group challenge.

In many ways VFC provides veterans a short-term opportunity to test out their interest in wildland fire without having to make a long term commitment. We typically find that veterans quickly learn whether wildland fire is for them and whether they want to pursue it as a career. Those who enjoy the work are often passionate about careers in wildland fire; others quickly figure out that they need a different type of career. Fire agencies see VFC as a filter or, as one land manager called it, “the minor league hotshots” where they can work with veterans and hire the program alumni who best meet agency requirements.

Project Accomplishments: The projects VFC crews complete are critical to forest and community health across the country. Wildfires continue to burn hotter, faster and more frequently. Fuels reduction, fire mitigation and prescribed burn assignments that VFC crews are tasked with are critical to insuring that, if a wildfire does burn, effects are mitigated.

In 2015, Conservation Legacy engaged current era veterans throughout the Southwest, training and preparing them for jobs in wildland fire while accomplishing priority projects identified by US Forest Service partners. Two Conservation Legacy programs, Arizona Conservation Corps and Southwest Conservation Corps, served 58 veterans over this time period providing S-212, S-130/190, First Aid and some additional advanced trainings including Incident Management and Felling Boss. In 2015, those veterans completed over 37,000 project work hours improving nearly 4,400 acres of public land.

Project work was varied but primarily focused on forest fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, prescribed burn preparation and invasive species removal. The forest fuels reduction was the majority of the project work and was focused on treating high-density areas with heavy fuel loads. Veteran fire crews reduced fire fuel loads that included Piñon, Juniper, Ponderosa, and Oak on public lands through Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. Invasive species projects were primarily focused on the removal of Tamarisk and Russian Olive.



VFC impacts the Veterans engaged with VFC as well as communities where VFC crews operate. VFC helps Veterans transition from military service to equally meaningful civilian service in a structured, safe and impactful way. The transition is facilitated by completing meaningful work in local communities protecting people, property and resources from the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

Overall Impact: Since 2011, the California Conservation Corps, Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association have engaged over 800 Veterans. The majority of VFC program graduates have been hired onto a wildland fire crew with a state or federal agency, found employment with a land management agency in a job unrelated to fire, returned to participate in or lead additional VFC crews, or continued into higher education for natural resource management.

Many hotshot crews have hired VFC members immediately after their crew finished because the hiring managers knew they would be getting a well-trained and prepared firefighter. Other hand crews and engine crews throughout the country have also picked up VFC members. Federal land management agency employees often call CCC, Conservation Legacy or SCA asking for information on current VFC members or alums because they want to conduct specific outreach to these individuals for employment openings that they have.

VFC alums are trained and ready for the rigors and challenges that wildland firefighting presents. Those individuals who opt out of a wildland position take with them important components of the program.

The other critical component to the impact of the program are the projects VFC members complete during their term of service, especially the benefits to local communities and citizens. For instance, VFC crews in Arizona and Colorado in 2015 reduced hazardous fuels on nearly 4,400 acres of public land in the Wildland Urban Interface. VFC crews also assisted with the creation of fuel breaks, helped with prescribed burns, removed invasive species and improved local trails and waterways.

The combination of completing meaningful work, engaging in this work along with other Veterans focused on a common goal is what makes the VFC program so impactful. It contains the mission, structure, camaraderie and sense of professional and personal purpose that is critical to helping current-era Veterans transition from a successful career in the military to a successful career back at home.

The impact of the program can be seen in the stories of veterans who have been impacted through VFC participation:

- *Arizona Conservation Corps-Zachary Dancy*

Zach worked for the Army National Guard as a medic and previously as a civilian nurse practitioner. He was active military until spring 2015 when he joined the VFC Program with the Arizona Conservation Corps in Tucson. There he came to really enjoy the work, as well as the



people he got to work with. Every day he felt excited to go out into the field and help others progress and succeed in the VFC program. Though fighting fire has become a lingering interest for Zach, for now he wants to stay involved in VFC programs as a leader and mentor for the foreseeable future. Recently he was promoted from VFC member to Crew Leader to help other veterans' transition to civilian life through the VFC.

- *Arizona Conservation Corps-Ben Florey*

Ben Florey was born and raised in Michigan. He enlisted in the Marine Corps as a Rifleman and was based out of Camp Pendleton from 2008 to 2014. Ben served as an Infantry Squad Leader and served two tours in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Ben separated honorably from the Marines in 2014 having attained the rank of Sergeant. That same year he moved to Yuma, Arizona with his wife who was pursuing a career in primary education.

Ben was working at a Home Depot in Yuma helping to support his family when he decided to take a chance and pursue a career in Wildland Fire. In January of 2016, Ben joined the Veteran Fire Corps, serving with Arizona Conservation Corps in Tucson. Ben received basic training in first aid, wildfire suppression and chainsaw operation. He spent ten weeks working in and around the communities of Yarnell, Prescott Valley, Yuma, and Safford aiding in fuel mitigation projects designed to help protect BLM Resources and Wildland Urban Interface Communities from the threat of fire. During his term of service he met BLM staff in Yuma looking to hire seasonal wildland fire fighters. Two months into Ben's term of service he was offered a position on a light engine with BLM on the Colorado River District. Ben is currently serving as a GS-4 Seasonal Range Technician (Fire) with the BLM fighting fire at home and across the western United States. He intends to continue pursuing a career in fire and land management.

- *Southwest Conservation Corps-Caleb Courtney*

Caleb served five years in the Marine Corps. When he finished with the military he struggled with the civilian side of life. Everything built up to an early mid-life crisis when he had a mental breakdown that ended with a divorce and a lot of questions on his part about what was next in life.

Caleb discovered that the VFC program was what he needed to not only be successful in the firefighting world, but to give him a transition back into civilian life. The VFC helped him retain some of the camaraderie and understanding that he had in the military by allowing him to spend time with fellow combat veterans, but also gave him the opportunity to reestablish his life through simple things like cooking outdoors and working long days in a field he enjoyed.

The program gave him the experience and technical skills he needed to pursue a career in firefighting. Caleb left with great friendships and a more solid direction in life; he highly recommends the VFC program to any combat veteran that is interested in a similar career. He is currently looking towards several hotshot crews and thinking about stepping into a VFC leadership role.



There are also significant impacts on public lands:

- The SCC launched the original VFC pilot program in 2009 with the San Juan National Forest in southwestern Colorado. SCC worked with the District Fire Management Officer, Shawna Legarza, to develop the program. Ms. Legarza, who is now the National Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the USFS, worked closely with SCC to define the VFC as a combination of certification training, on the job experience and direct agency personnel mentorship to support the development of the technical, teamwork and leaderships skills required to become an agency fire fighter. Since then SCC has thinned hundreds of acres on the San Juan National Forest around the communities of southwestern Colorado, making them more defensible in the event of wildfire, which is ever present in the American West.
- The Arizona Conservation Corps, the USFS, and the BLM have collaborated to build the VFC as an on the job training experience in forestry, conservation, and wildland fire fuels management. The VFC in Arizona is an immersive experience: Over the course of the program members live, work and learn on public lands in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. The program is composed of approximately 20% classroom instruction and 80% conservation project work. Throughout the program members live in a small cohort and work to complete critical fuels reduction projects in association with federal project partners from the USFS and BLM. In the early 2015-16 season 15 veterans were offered the level of certification required to become effective entry level fire fighters while improving over 30 acres. Of that 15 person cohort, three individuals have agency fire jobs, three are actively seeking them, one is leading VFC crews and two are enrolling in higher education in fire science. Each year, small regional partnerships like this roll up together with others to yield the national impact numbers highlighted earlier.

H.R. 5114, “21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act of 2016.” The 21CSC Act is a bipartisan, budget-neutral critical piece of legislation that will expand the impact, breadth and depth of the VFC. Some of the most critical parts of the 21CSC Act – in terms of impact to veterans – include:

- Inclusion of veterans. The 21CSC Act specifically addresses veterans throughout the legislation from the title, the purpose and the provisions. It recognizes the importance that veterans bring to their communities and the impact that VFC type programs can have on the veterans who participate. In the section on “Emphasis on Diversity and Inclusion” the 21CSC Act requires programs to make “deliberate outreach efforts to engage... veterans.”
- Expansion to Veterans Administration and Department of Defense. Both the VA and DOD currently lack authorities to engage non-profit conservation corps through cooperative agreements similar to how the Departments of Agriculture and Interior engage corps. The 21CSC Act will provide these authorities, allowing both VA and DOD to partner with VFC programs to engage veterans doing conservation work on military lands. For instance, the Congressional Research Service reported in 2014 that



the DOD currently owns more than 14,477,000 acres of land in the US. Much of this land has need for hazardous fuels treatment, invasive plant removal, wetlands remediation, streambank stabilization, fencing and more. VFC crews – with the authorities granted in the 21CSC Act – could accomplish much of this needed work while providing training and career development opportunities for veterans.

- **Age limit for veterans.** The 21CSC Act provides a special age limit of veterans “up to age 35”, which is extremely helpful in engaging veterans through programs like the VFC. This age limit is close to the age when many firefighting agencies will no longer accept new applicants for permanent firefighting positions.
- **Lowering match requirements.** The smaller match requirements in 21CSC Act will allow new and smaller partner organizations to develop VFC and similar veteran-serving programs. In addition, it will allow organizations that serve harder-to-serve populations, such as veterans with disabilities, to participate in the 21CSC without needing to raise higher match amounts.
- **Noncompetitive hiring status.** While many veterans have a hiring status with federal agencies due to their military service, the non-competitive hiring status provisions in the 21CSC Act provide a back-up and secondary status that will be useful. In addition, some veterans did not serve long enough in the military – for any variety of reasons including discharge for health reasons, guard or reserve status, etc. – to fully qualify for veteran hiring preferences so can instead rely on the 21CSC Act hiring provisions.

H.R. 2167, “Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2015.” The Public Lands Service Corps Act increases the age limit for veterans to 35, which is extremely helpful since few veterans complete their military service before they are 25 years old. Other than that provision, the PLSC Act does not specifically address veterans. The increase to two years of the noncompetitive hiring status would provide a similar benefit to that part of the 21CSC Act.