

**Testimony of Mary Ellen Sprenkel, President & CEO of The Corps Network
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Hearing On “Building Back Better: Examining the Future of America’s Public Lands”**

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Introduction

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and Members of the Subcommittee, good morning and thank you for hosting today’s hearing on “Building Back Better: Examining the Future of America’s Public Lands.” Thank you also for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on how Service and Conservation Corps can and should be part of that effort.

My name is Mary Ellen Sprenkel and I am the President and CEO of The Corps Network, which is the national association of Service and Conservation Corps. The Corps Network represents more than 130 member organizations, or Corps. Based on the model and philosophy of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, today’s Corps provide young adults, between the ages of 16 and 25, and recent veterans up to age 35, with opportunities to advance their education, obtain essential 21st Century workforce skills, and gain hands on work experience through conservation service projects in their communities and on public lands across the country.

The New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps

Nearly a century ago, the United States faced several crises at the same time: The Great Depression, which resulted in the unemployment of nearly 25 percent of working age men and widespread poverty; environmental issues including drought, erosion, and wildfire; and the need for improved national infrastructure. In response to those challenges, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The New Deal CCC was an entirely federally run program. The Department of the Army established and ran “CCC Camps” across the country to provide housing for the CCC participants, or “CCC Boys” as they were called. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior worked with state and local governments to identify CCC projects and the Department of Labor did the recruiting and provided education and training to CCC participants. After nine years of operation, the CCC employed approximately 3 million young men, primarily between the ages of 18 and 25 and primarily white.

During that time, the CCC Boys built more than 125,000 miles of roads and trails, 318,000 dams, 47,000 bridges and 3,500 fire towers. They installed 90,000 miles of telephone lines and 5,000 miles of irrigation channels, restored more than 20 million acres of habitat and rangeland, created approximately 800 state and local parks, and planted 3 billion trees. They also responded to hundreds of disasters, including hurricanes, floods, and fires. The CCC Boys received \$30 a

month, \$25 of which was sent home to their families. That is comparable to \$600 a month today. The total cost of the program to the federal government was approximately \$3 billion, which is the equivalent of \$60 billion today. However, this investment resulted in an infrastructure and park system we still use today. In addition, the CCC prepared a generation of young men for World War II and then to return home to build one of the strongest economies in U.S. history.

Corps Today

Fast forward to today. The current unemployment rate for young adults is above 10 percent, and as high as 20 percent for young adults of color; federal, state, and local resource management agencies collectively face billions in deferred maintenance; and communities across the country are ill-prepared for the impacts of climate change and the catastrophic storms that result. Further, a shift towards a clean, sustainable economy will require new skill sets. Unfortunately, the current workforce is not prepared for such a massive undertaking. For example, according to the Brookings Institute, the transportation and infrastructure (T&I) workforce alone presently supports 17.2 million jobs, representing 12% of all workers in the country. Nearly 20% of those workers are eligible for or nearing the age of retirement. As a result, it is estimated that by 2024 the T&I workforce will need to fill nearly three million jobs just to maintain the present level. The same is true across other industry workforces, like agriculture, conservation and natural resource management, and outdoor recreation.

It is no surprise then, that once again, Americans are calling for a bold, large-scale solution – a modern day CCC – and that President Biden has issued an Executive Order to establish a Civilian Climate Corps. Fortunately, today, unlike the 1930s, we do not have to start from scratch and we don't have to build a new federal bureaucracy to achieve the same results. Based on the infrastructure and expertise of existing Corps, with additional investments in project work, workforce development, and Corpsmember services and support, today's Corps could double, or even triple the number of young people they engage and the amount of project work they complete, in a short period of time.

Diversity of Programs – Unlike the original CCC, today's Corps are primarily public-private partnerships. While the majority of today's Corps are non-profit organizations, some are housed in entities of state or local government or in postsecondary institutions. Large national programs, like Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association enable college-age students to explore careers in the fields of conservation and resource management in iconic national parks and forests across the country. State and regional Corps like the Idaho, Montana, and Texas Conservation Corps provide opportunities for young people to serve in specific geographic regions. Residential programs like the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Forest Service Conservation Job Corps Centers (JCCCC) provide young adults with opportunities to

earn a high school diploma or GED and develop skills to prepare them for jobs in the 21st Century economy. And community-based programs like Green City Force in Brooklyn, NY and Mile High Youth Corps in Denver, CO engage local youth in conservation-related service in their own communities.

In addition, they utilize different program models to meet the specific needs of the communities and populations they serve. Term lengths vary from six weeks to two years, with the average term of service being nine months. Some Corps utilize a camping model where a crew of eight to ten Corpsmembers, supported by one or two crew leaders, lives and works in the back country for weeks, or even months, at a time. Some Corps do only local projects and send their Corpsmembers home each night. Other Corps support individual placements or interns in positions all over the country. Some Corps run charter schools and/or GED programs and provide Corpsmember support such as childcare, healthcare, and transportation.

Many Corps, particularly those that enroll disadvantaged or disconnected young people (Opportunity Youth), have a strong focus on workforce development. These Corps provide their Corpsmembers with opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials, such as first-aid/CPR, OSHA 10/40, Chain Saw Certification, Disaster Response, Energy Auditor and Firefighter Types I and II. Some Corps partner with local employers and unions to serve as a “pre-apprenticeship program” or to deliver parts of all of a registered apprenticeship program. For example, Civic Works in Baltimore serves as a pre-apprenticeship program for the National Association of Landscape Professionals’ (NALP) DOL registered apprenticeship program and Corpsmembers at Mt. Adams Institute in Washington State graduate as fully apprenticed firefighters. And all Corpsmembers who graduate from a Corps with the requisite number of hours on qualified public lands projects are eligible for non-competitive hiring status at a federal land or resource management agency. Last year, 18 Corpsmembers at Mile High Youth Corps utilized their Corps experience and/or their PLC non-competitive hiring authority to obtain jobs with a range of federal, state, and local resource management agencies. Approximately half of these Corpsmembers were people of color.

Diversity of Participants/Corpsmembers – Also unlike the original CCC, today’s Corps engage diverse participants, or Corpsmembers. Each year, the nation’s 130+ Service and Conservation Corps collectively enroll nearly 25,000 young adults between the ages of 16 and 30, and recent veterans up to age 35. Approximately 46 percent of these Corpsmembers identify as female and 44 percent identify as persons of color. Some Corps focus on specific populations. Greening Youth Foundation in Atlanta, GA, the Hispanic Access Foundation based in Washington, DC,

and Rocky Mountain Youth Corps in Taos, NM, intentionally engage young people of color, including Black, Latinx, and Tribal youth. Other Corps, like the Northwest Youth Corps based in Eugene, OR, and the Utah Conservation Corps run programming specifically for young people with different abilities. Still others like the Detroit Conservation Corps and the Mt. Adams Institute run programming for returning citizens and recent veterans.

Corpsmembers are also very diverse in terms of their backgrounds and experience. About 50% of current Corpsmembers are out-of-work and out-of-school and report income levels below the poverty line (Opportunity Youth). Some Corpsmembers need to finish high school or earn a GED. For many young people, the Corps experience is their first “job,” and they need to develop important workplace skills like effective communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. Attending a Corps with a charter school and workforce development program while simultaneously working with a crew on labor-intensive conservation and resource management projects, provides a perfect opportunity for Opportunity Youth to advance their education, obtain work-readiness skills, and gain hands-on work experience. Other Corpsmembers might be in college and looking to explore a specific career field. For these Corpsmembers, a better fit might be an individual placement or internship position with a resource management agency, like the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service, doing research, planning, and development.

Diversity of Project Work – Today’s Corps are also diverse in terms of the project work they do and the agencies with which they partner on that work. In rural areas, Corps crews partner with federal, state, local, and tribal land and water management agencies to build and maintain trails, campgrounds and other outdoor recreation facilities; restore and protect habitat and waterways, remove invasive species and hazardous fuels, and much more. For instance, Northwest Youth Corps partners with the National Park Service to build and maintain trails in Olympic National Park while the Montana Conservation Corps has an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service to remove invasive species and hazardous fuel from the Bitterroot National Forest. In urban areas, Corps partner with city, county, and state agencies, like Parks and Recreation, to build parks, playgrounds, greenspaces and urban gardens; and Public Housing and Public Works to install green infrastructure including solar panels; energy efficient heating, cooling and water systems; green roofs; rain gardens and permeable surfaces. Mile High Youth Corps works with Denver Public Housing to retrofit and weatherize low-income homes and Civic Works has an agreement with the City of Baltimore to install solar panels, green roofs, and permeable surfaces on public facilities. And many Corps across the country, such as the California Conservation Corps and Texas Conservation Corps respond to disasters like fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. In

response to the pandemic, many Corps have temporarily transitioned to COVID-19-related emergency response like food delivery, ventilator distribution, and field hospital construction. Regardless of their location and the specific nature of their project work, all Corps provide essential services in their respective communities.

In 2019 alone, the existing network of Corps restored 1.4 million acres of habitat, planted more than 1 million trees, built 13,000 miles of trail, constructed or improved nearly 8,000 community gardens and green spaces, recycled 31,000 pounds of waste, audited and/or weatherized more than 31,000 homes, and responded to 223 natural disasters. With the funding, support, and coordination of the Civilian Climate Corps, all these numbers could be dramatically increased.

Expansion under ARRA

In the 1930s, the CCC stimulated the economy and created jobs during the Great Depression. Likewise, in 2009-2010, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulated the economy and provided jobs during the Great Recession. ARRA included language that provided Corps with a preference for appropriate, shovel-ready projects on federal public lands and waters. This language resulted in \$60 million in new project work and 10,000 additional Corpsmembers for existing Corps. Through this increased investment, Corps like Conservation Legacy and the Conservation Corps of Southern Utah State University doubled in size. Investments through ARRA not only enabled Corps to grow their existing programs, but it also allowed them to develop and pilot new program models to engage specific populations and meet specific needs, like Veterans Fire Corps and the Ancestral Lands Program.

Lessons Learned from CCC and ARRA

Today we are able to look back at both the CCC and expansion under ARRA to assess what worked well and what did not work so well. We know, for example that the CCC enrolled only men and of those, primarily white men. African American and Native CCC members were enrolled in small numbers and placed in segregated camps. Today, we know that women and people of color bring enormous benefit to Corps and communities in which they serve. In fact, intentional and specific efforts should be made to include and grow Corps run by and serving diverse populations and communities. Populations and communities that have been most negatively impacted by COVID-19 should receive the greatest benefit from increased federal investment.

And despite ARRA's many successes, we know that the majority of increased investment into the nation's infrastructure and public lands went to large-scale, multi-million dollar projects done by large contractors. The residents and economies of individual communities would have benefited more from smaller, but equally important, projects completed by local workers, particularly underserved youth in need of a first job. They would have also benefited from an

increased investment not only in project work but also in workforce development programming that would have prepared people for and improved the competitiveness of the 21st Century workforce. In addition, greater uniformity and utilization of the Public Lands Corps non-competitive hiring authority would have improved the long-term workforce outcomes of ARRA.

We also know in hindsight that matching requirements and time-bound project agreements and funds prevented significant and lasting growth at many Corps. All of these issues, however, could be addressed through an economic recovery package and/or the Civilian Climate Corps Initiative currently being developed by the Biden Administration.

Recommendations

Therefore, as this Committee and Congress discuss the important benefits of including the restoration and outdoor recreation economy as part of an economic recovery bill, The Corps Network urges you to consider the following:

- 1) Funding for projects not only on federal public lands and waters, but also funding for similar projects at the state and local level
- 2) A preference or set-aside of appropriate shovel-ready projects for Conservation Corps
- 3) A preference or set-aside of funding and resources for Corps run by and/or engaging currently underserved and under-represented populations
- 4) An increased investment in youth and workforce development funding, like AmeriCorps and WIOA Youth Programs, in addition to increased funding for project work
- 5) Increased uniformity and utilization of the PLC hiring authority
- 6) Longer-term agreements and projects
- 7) And a waiver or reduction of the 25 percent match required by participating Corps

Conclusion

In closing, TCN, our 130 member Corps, and the 25,000 young adults they annually engage commend the Committee for considering the important role our public lands can play in economic recovery and job creation. Further, we urge the Committee to consider the inclusion of specific provisions that would drive the impact of such a stimulus package beyond multi-million dollar investments in huge companies for large, expensive projects to smaller, but equally important investments in projects that will benefit more people and more communities, and develop the next – more diverse – generation of outdoor enthusiasts, resource managers, and environmental stewards.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on this important issue.