

Written Testimony of Linda Goodman, Regional Forester and Forest Service Job Corps National Director (Ret.)

Thank you, Chairmen Westerman and Tiffany and Ranking Members Grijalva and Neguse, for inviting me to speak about the important work being conducted by the students and staff of the nation's Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers. More specifically, I am here to speak in support of the Civilian Conservation Center (CCC) Enhancement Act which would allow our nation to better leverage the Job Corps CCCs to advance our federal land management mission.

I came to the Forest Service not by design but by opportunity. As a 22-year-old, I took a job as a receptionist in the Forest Service in a small rural town in the state of Washington where there weren't many job opportunities available. I took a job but, over time, I learned that I was working with people who took on a mission. They loved the land, enjoyed their work, and were deeply invested in the mission of the Forest Service. It was infectious and they helped me to develop that same sense of purpose: dedication to the land and our mission to conserve and protect it.

Eventually my career path within the Forest Service brought me to the Siuslaw National Forest where I served as an Administrative Officer and later Deputy Forest Supervisor. There I had the chance to become involved with the Angell Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center. The students of Angell Job Corps CCCs, all of whom were 16 to 24 and economically disadvantaged, often worked alongside our employees and on behalf of the National Forest maintaining campgrounds, rehabilitating visitor and education facilities, clearing illegal camps, and even serving as wildland firefighters. I saw young people at the start of adulthood and their careers finding purpose in service and working on the land, just as I had many years earlier. When I was offered the chance to lead and help create a national management infrastructure for the Job Corps CCCs, I jumped at the opportunity.

Over the course of my 34-year career in the Forest Service, including stints as a Regional Forester and Chief of Staff for the Forest Service, overseeing and directing the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers was among the most challenging and most rewarding work. Challenging because the students who enroll in Job Corps often come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and their stories when they arrived at our doors could be heartbreaking. But it was the most rewarding work because we helped thousands of these young Americans find purpose and change their stories for the better.

Job Corps' mission has always been aligned with that of the Forest Service and other land management agencies. In fact, Job Corps emerged partly from a desire to continue the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps that, during the Great Depression, put millions of unemployed young men at the cusp of adulthood to work on federal lands. As such, the Forest Service was

deeply involved in the conception and design of the program. It was western and rural members of this body that enabled the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created Job Corps, based on a desire to extend economic opportunity to their own communities through the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers (CCCs).

The Job Corps CCCs continue to pay dividends on that investment. Each year, thousands of young men and women enroll in Job Corps CCCs, many of whom were homeless or aging out of foster care, and all of whom were struggling to secure employment and transition into a financially independent adulthood. But Job Corps isn't just a boon for these young Americans. Continuing the mission of the original CCCs, these young people annually contribute hundreds of thousands of hours of service on federal lands. This year, Job Corps CCCs students have so far provided 425,000 hours of support to federal land and rural development projects, including more than 280,000 hours of support to federal wildland firefighting efforts. At the height of the 2023 fire season, 1 of every 8 Job Corps CCC students was out supporting national fire efforts, including actively fighting fires. These young workers are an invaluable resource at a time when the Forest Service and other federal and state agencies are struggling to hire and retain wildland firefighters.

Job Corps CCC students' contributions to our federal lands mission is significant and calculable. The value of giving young people a sense of purpose and belonging is immeasurable. Young adults continue to report increasing rates of reported anxiety, depression, and loneliness tied to feeling "unmoored, directionless... and find[ing] little meaning in either school or work."¹ These challenges are even more acute in rural communities where opportunity is often more limited and social isolation easier.

Job Corps offers socially and economically disconnected young people an opportunity to reengage with education, career development, and a community. Through service-learning on federal lands Job Corps CCC students gain not only skills but perspective on what they have to offer and how to be a reliable member of a team. The money they earn as wildland firefighters sets them up for success in transitioning to independent living by enabling them to save enough to afford the deposit on their first apartment and buy their first car. Job Corps CCC students frequently cite the prestige and wages earned from these service-learning projects as motivation to behave, focus, and earn the opportunity to go out on the lands and work.

The bipartisan CCC Enhancement Act introduced in the House by Representatives Salinas, Edwards, Guthrie, and Hoyle and in the Senate by Senators Merkley, Daines, King, and Rounds aims to leverage the Job Corps CCCs further by creating additional service-learning and career

¹ Making Caring Common. (2023). *On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges*. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/on-edge>

opportunities for Job Corps students. It would simply provide the Forest Service with new flexibilities to address some of the agency's most pressing priorities.

For years, federal land management agencies have struggled to hire and retain wildland firefighters. In response to these needs, the Forest Service expanded the wildland firefighting and related offerings at its Job Corps CCC campuses across the country. As a result, every year the Forest Service is able to temporarily employ skilled Job Corps firefighters using an emergency authority. Unfortunately, once these firefighters graduate Job Corps, the Forest Service struggles to permanently employ them due to the cumbersome federal hiring process. More often than not, these economically disadvantaged Job Corps graduates lack the financial means to endure the lengthy federal hiring process. So they take other work and move on with their lives, denying the Forest Service the opportunity to hire firefighters it has specifically trained. The CCC Enhancement Act would correct this by creating a special hiring authority that enables the Forest Service to immediately extend employment offers to skilled Job Corps CCC graduates. It would assist the Forest Service in meeting Chief Moore's goal to hire hundreds of Job Corps graduates and firefighters in the coming years.²

Over the last few years, Congress made historic new federal investments in the Forest Service and land management agencies through the Great American Outdoors Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act. These investments are intended to address the growing backlog of deferred maintenance, forest restoration, fuels reduction, and wildfire management projects nationwide. By legally authorizing the Forest Service to temporarily employ Job Corps students, the CCC Enhancement Act would enable Job Corps CCCs to be an additional tool, outside the often drawn-out federal procurement process, that the Forest Service and Regional Foresters could use to rapidly execute these projects.

During my time as Regional Forester, one of our most pressing needs was deferred maintenance of our Forest Service compounds. We had buildings that were literally falling down and in need of immediate repairs. If I could have had the opportunity to bring in Job Corps CCC students with their instructors to work on some of our highest priority projects, at a lower cost and on a faster timeline, I would have counted myself lucky. In fact, the Job Corps CCCs would have become my go-to solution for many deferred maintenance projects and it would have been a win-win-win for students, local constituents, and taxpayers.

With this in mind, another Forest Service priority the bill encourages tackling with Job Corps CCC service-learning is the significant challenge wildland firefighters face in securing housing. As rents and home prices have risen, many heroes in one of our nation's most dangerous jobs have found themselves homeless and living out of their vehicles. The CCC Enhancement Act proposes utilizes Job Corps CCC students trained in carpentry, electrical repair, plumbing,

² Moore, R. *Hiring Job Corps Graduates – Leader's Intent*. U.S. Forest Service. February 11, 2022.

facilities maintenance, or other building trades to rehabilitate the Forest Service's own stock of housing that has fallen into disrepair. These barracks could be used to house wildland firefighters and ensure our first responders have a roof over their heads. This is not just an idea, Job Corps CCCs students are currently refurbishing bunk houses in the Gila National Forest that will be used by wildland firefighters. This bill would amplify those efforts.

Finally, building off the Forest Service's success in building out training programs tailored towards the agency's key workforce needs, the bill encourages the land management agencies to identify and develop new career pathways for Job Corps students into federal land management careers. To my students, my career path was a testament that they could start at an entry-level job and, with hard work, move up through the ranks to become an organizational leader. Creating additional pathways for those who may not graduate college into federal service, particularly in rural communities, will broaden economic opportunity and the potential for federal officials to be more reflective of the constituents they serve.

Importantly, the proposals in the CCC Enhancement Act advance bipartisan federal land management priorities not just in Congress but across administrations. The bill has received endorsements from across the spectrum of federal land management stakeholders including the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, the Western Fire Chiefs Association, the Forest Resources Association, the National Job Corps Association, the National Federation of Federal Employees, the Corps Network, and the Nature Conservancy.

I know some of you on the committee have visited your Job Corps campuses and may have even participated in a graduation ceremony. Watching a graduation of Job Corps students was a game changer for me. Seeing firsthand disadvantaged young Americans, who arrived at our doors unsure of themselves and their future, embark on their careers with confidence and purpose as well as the skills they'd need to succeed, broadened my perspective on what we could achieve within our mission to protect America's most valuable resources.

The mission and work of the Job Corps CCCs is more vital than ever. I invite each of you to visit a Job Corps CCC campus to meet the students and learn about the incredible work they're doing on federal lands. I know the National Job Corps Association would be eager to facilitate those visits. And I hope you'll support the passage of the CCC Enhancement Act. I look forward to answering any question you may have.