

**Testimony of Mary Ellen Sprenkel, President & CEO of The Corps Network**  
*Interior Appropriations Subcommittee on FY21 Interior & US Forest Service Appropriations*

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Mary Ellen Sprenkel and I am President and CEO of The Corps Network. On behalf of The Corps Network, our 131 member Corps, and the 25,000 Corpsmembers they annually engage, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee about utilizing Service and Conservation Corps to complete priority projects of the National Park Service and related public land management agencies.

Corps are locally-based non-profit organizations that engage young adults (generally ages 16 – 30) and veterans (up to age 35) in service projects that address recreation, conservation, disaster response, and community needs. Through a term of service that could last from a few months to a year, Corps participants – or “Corpsmembers” – gain work experience and develop in-demand skills. Corpsmembers are compensated with a stipend or living allowance and often receive an education award or scholarship upon completing their service. Additionally, Corps provide participants educational programming, mentoring, and access to career and personal counseling.

### **Corps History and Background**

As far back as the 1930s, Conservation Corps have been helping the federal land management agencies complete important and necessary projects in a high quality and cost-effective manner. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrolled approximately 3 million young men from 1933-1942; built more than 125,000 miles of roads, 47,000 bridges, 318,000 dams, and 3,000 fire towers; planted nearly 3 billion trees; and developed more than 3 million acres for public use in 854 state and 94 national parks. The CCC was disbanded in 1942.

Today’s 21st Century Conservation Service Corps continue to work with land management agencies to maintain and improve our natural resource and recreation infrastructure.

Last year alone, Corps engaged over 25,000 youth and veterans in conservation-related service in all 50 states and DC, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa. For example, in FY19 Corps built, improved, or maintained 13,317 miles of multi-use trails and waterways; restored 1.4 million acres of wildlife and fish habitat; cleared 66,929 acres of invasive species; removed 19,405 acres of hazardous fuels; increased access to and utilization of 7,914 recreational facilities; responded to 223 wildfires and other natural disasters; preserved 336 historic structures, and planted almost 1.1 million trees. Further, they leveraged an additional 107,000 volunteers who completed 537,879 service hours valuing over \$13.6 million dollars.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Process of Public Private Partnerships**

In 1993, Congress passed the Public Lands Corps Act (PLCA) to provide the Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Interior (DOI) with the authority to utilize contracts and cooperative agreements to engage Corps on conservation and infrastructure projects on public lands. The vast

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<sup>1</sup> Value of Volunteer Time, Independent Sector, <https://independentsector.org/value-of-volunteer-time-2018/>

majority of project work is done through cooperative agreements and as required by law, all Public Lands Corps (PLC) projects must have a “long-term public benefit.”

Congress recently updated the PLCA with the John S. McCain III 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act (21CSC Act), which passed in 2019 as part of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act.

This update also established a Resource Assistants Program (RAP), through which the DOI and the USDA can engage diverse Corpsmembers, who are in college or have graduated from college, in individual placement or intern positions to assist with more technical projects and needs. RAP members are eligible for direct hire by DOI and USDA.

Land managers find Corps to be cost-effective and capable of producing high quality work. The NPS commissioned an independent study by Booz-Allen-Hamilton which found that Corps can save up to 87 percent on certain maintenance projects<sup>2</sup>. In addition, in regular surveys, virtually all federal project partners (99.6 percent) report being highly satisfied with the project work and say they would work with Corps again.

### **Expanding the Role of Corps to Meet Public Land Management & Workforce Goals**

When Congress established the Public Land Corps, they found three things: 1) that a lot of labor intensive work was needed to restore our public facilities and natural resources; 2) that partnering with Corps had proven such work could get done in a cost effective and efficient manner; and 3) that using Corps to enhance and maintain our natural and cultural resources came with tremendous benefits to the young men and women who carried out the work

With over \$19 billion in deferred maintenance on federal lands, we need to harness America’s growing enthusiasm for the great outdoors and engage more people in service and volunteerism on public lands. One obvious strategy is to engage and bring to scale the existing network of Corps to start tackling a variety of deferred maintenance categories<sup>3</sup> already identified by the Restore Our Parks project. This includes \$462 million in trail projects, \$612 million needed in landscape projects including cultural, natural, and recreation spaces; \$32 million in park boundary projects like signage and fencing; and \$31 million in trail bridge work. Those are just a few project categories from the National Park System’s backlog and well within the capacity of our existing network of Conservation Corps programs.

During a term of service, Corpsmembers gain important skills in communications, problem solving, and time management, while also gaining industry-recognized credentials in areas including chainsaw operation, wildfire response (also known as earning their Red Card), and wilderness first aid. Corpsmembers are put on a career pathway and gain a broad set of work-based experiences that prepare them for public or private sector employment, or future entrepreneurial endeavors.

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<sup>2</sup> Conservation Corps Project Analysis, Fall 2012, Booz Allen Hamilton commissioned via NPS, <https://corpsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NPS-PFMD-Conservation-Corps-Project-Analysis-FINALv2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Park Deferred Maintenance Needs, A data visualization from The Pew Charitable Trusts, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2018/national-park-deferred-maintenance-needs>

### *Historic Preservation*

In addition to traditional natural resource work, many Corps participate in projects to preserve America's historic and cultural resources. One recent example of expanded use of Corps by the NPS to complete needed maintenance is in the field of historic preservation. Six years ago, TCN partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to form HOPE (Hands on Preservation Experience) Crew, consisting of a traditional Corps crew alongside a historic preservation craft expert to teach and train the crew. Several hundred projects have been completed in the years since.

Corpsmembers have worked on projects at such sites as Grand Teton National Park, Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Gateway National Recreation Area, and many others. Through these projects, Corpsmembers not only develop a sense of connection to our country's history but learn marketable job skills.

More recently, to build a career track in traditional preservation craft, TCN members have partnered with the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center (HPTC) to place young people in apprentice-level preservation work on needed deferred preservation maintenance projects in the parks. Program participants complete an intensive two-week basic training in historic preservation fundamentals and introductory craft construction skills. Those skills are put to work using tools and materials common in the preservation of older buildings and structures over the next five to six months following their training.

### **FY21 Appropriations Request**

With the passage of the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) as part of the Natural Resources Management Act of 2019, Congress recognized the need to increase the utilization of Corps to address backlogged conservation, recreation, forestry, and infrastructure projects on our public lands.

**The National Park Service relies on several funding streams to engage Corps in this work. Therefore, we respectfully request that you support funding increases that directly address deferred maintenance needs within the Operation of the National Park System (ONPS) and Construction accounts in FY21. Specifically, we request strong funding levels for the Repair and Rehabilitation, Cyclic Maintenance and Line Item Construction accounts.**

In addition, we also request robust funding increases to similar accounts of other land management agencies under your jurisdiction including the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

**These specific accounts are the main funding sources for Corps partnerships.**

Corps also partner with both DOI and USFS to address wildfire remediation needs, and more specifically to help with hazardous fuels and invasive species reduction, which is a major need to prevent larger and more deadly fires. We appreciate the committee's bipartisan efforts the three previous fiscal years to ensure these accounts remain intact despite Administration budget proposals to cut many of these important programs.



### **Closing Remarks**

Corps have long been cost-effective partners of federal land management agencies and have been working to generate excitement and new ways to engage youth and veterans in outdoor service while helping to accomplish much-needed project work. The time has come to seriously consider Corps as an essential part of any plan to tackle deferred maintenance and usher in future stewards and champions of our national treasures.

Thank you again for the chance to provide testimony. We hope the Committee will help us continue to take advantage of every opportunity to promote 21st Century Conservation Service Corps as a preferred and capable solution to meet the challenges facing our parks and public lands.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Mary Ellen Sprengel  
President & CEO