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Testimony of Charles “Chas” Robles, Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps Director, Conservation Legacy
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
On “Examining the Potential for a Civilian Climate Corps”

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to represent Conservation Legacy and the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps (ALCC) and speak to the important role that current corps programs can play in supporting the Civilian Climate Corps (CCC) initiative. I am grateful for the opportunity to share from experience and speak to how our sector can positively impact even more lives and communities through this initiative while mitigating the impacts of climate change on our Tribal and public lands.

I have served in various roles within the conservation corps movement since my initial experience as a Corpsmember with the Student Conservation Association’s Desert Restoration Corps (DRC) in 2006. I spent 10 months as part of a small crew working to restore critical habitat and protect threatened and endangered species in the Mojave Desert. I fell in love with the work that corps do and the people who hear the call of national service through the work we complete. I have spent the last 15 years of my life working in various capacities with multiple conservation corps across the American West: I helped rebuild trails in Mt. Rainer National Park after floods destroyed much of the infrastructure there in 2007; I returned to the Mojave Desert to lead crews for the DRC from 2007 – 2009; I have led high school crews for Rocky Mountain Youth Corps based in Steamboat Springs, CO; have served as a Field Supervisor, Program Coordinator, and Program Director for Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC); and have helped guide the growth and development of the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps at Conservation Legacy to the point where we are now recognized as a full-fledged corps program, an accomplishment that I am most proud of.

Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, and the Need for Indigenous Voices to lead the way in addressing Climate Change

The Ancestral Lands program was created in 2008 in the Pueblo of Acoma by Cornell Torivio. Mr. Torivio saw the positive impact that corps programs had on participants that came from across the country. He also saw a great need in his community to provide opportunities for youth and young adults to have positive impacts on the environment, their communities, and most importantly, on their own lives. Mr. Torivio worked with Harry Bruell and SCC to bring conservation corps programs to his community. For years, corps programs had recruited Indigenous participants to take part in programs outside of their communities, and it was through the vision of Mr. Torivio and Mr. Bruell that corps programs were brought to Indigenous communities. Since the inception of our program thirteen years ago, we have taken the same approach as Mr. Torivio, to work with Indigenous communities to create unique programs that provide personal and professional development opportunities while completing important cultural and natural resource projects on Tribal and public lands; stimulate local economies through the creation of jobs and paid national and local service positions; reconnect Indigenous young



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people to their culture, history, heritage, and traditions; and make our lands more resilient in the face of an ever changing climate.

Through the success that Mr. Torivio and the program in Acoma had, we have been able to catalyze new programs serving young people and the communities of the Navajo Nation, the Pueblo of Zuni, the Hopi Nation, The Pueblo of Isleta, and urban Indigenous young people in Albuquerque, NM. We have also created an Individual Placement program that engages Indigenous young professionals in paid internship opportunities to help them prepare for careers with land management agencies, Tribes, and non-profits across the country. We have built upon the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s and 1940s to uniquely serve Indigenous Americans, public lands, and local communities by completing habitat restoration, building critical infrastructure, connecting participants to career and postsecondary education, and investing in our communities to create positive change. ALCC and the many other corps programs across the country have proven success to build upon the work we are already doing to meet the needs of a Civilian Climate Corps. Additionally, it will be critical that Indigenous communities are involved in creating solutions to address the issue of climate change. As the original managers of lands and water on this continent, our ancestors have generations of experience and knowledge that have been passed down to us to help address and solve the impacts we see today. Western science is now showing that lands that are managed or co-managed by Indigenous communities have greater rates of biodiversity. Paired with the Indian Youth Service Corps initiative, passed into law under the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act in 2018, the Civilian Climate Corps legislation is poised to bring positive opportunities to Indigenous communities while creating career pathways for Indigenous young people and preparing our country to be more resilient in the face of climate change.

Invest in Local Communities to Create Widespread Change

Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps was created by a local community member, and our approach since our creation has been to let communities lead our growth. Each of our program offices has been developed by local champions and communities who saw the success we had in Acoma and other communities and wanted to develop similar opportunities in their local area. When we create new programs, we are committing to building a long-term relationship with those communities that create lasting positive impacts. Over our 13-year history, ALCC has created hundreds of local jobs, investing over \$10 million dollars in wages, salaries, and living allowances to locally based Indigenous staff, participants, and crew leaders and more than \$5 million in Siegal AmeriCorps Education Awards. More than 1000 Indigenous young people have participated in our programs, contributing over 500,000 hours of national service in helping to improve over 55,000 acres and 2,556 miles of Tribal and public lands.

Conservation corps utilize strong partnerships and relationships with public land managers to ensure that critical projects are identified and completed. The majority of the work ALCC has completed has been in partnership with staff at National Parks and Forests, BLM, and other federal, state, and city and county lands and takes place outside the boundaries of our Tribal communities, with our work in Albuquerque, NM being the main exception. The work our participants complete on public lands is powerful and important, and there is also an increasing need to complete projects that protect natural



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and cultural resources within our communities, in the areas where we live, work, learn, play, and pray. We have strengthened relationships with Tribes, creating partnerships directly with the Pueblo of Acoma, the Pueblo of Zuni, the Navajo Nation, the Hopi Nation, the Pueblo of Sandia, the Pueblo of Isleta, and are continuing to create opportunities to catalyze programs in other Tribal communities. By providing funding to support these types of projects and programs we amplify and increase the impact corps programs have, and we will be able to engage even more Indigenous young people in this critical work. Below are examples of the projects on Tribal and public lands that have been identified as priority needs by our communities and agency partners:

Threatened Water Resources

Problem

- Water is the source of life in our lands and communities. Changes in the snowpack in the West, prolonged drought, increased wildfires, and degraded waterways threaten this critical resource. Invasive species alone impact over 100 million acres of US land and cost over \$120 billion to manage annually, negatively affecting property, public utilities, native fisheries, ecosystems and outdoor recreation.

Solution

- The Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps and corps across the country can mobilize thousands of young people through a Civilian Climate Corps. A CCC can help protect this critical resource by removing invasive species, restoring streams and washes, replanting native species and preserving critical habitats to buffer plants and animals from changes in climate.

Degraded Habitat

Problem

- Severe wildfires, changing ecosystems, increasing drought and other changes are challenging wildlife, flora, and fauna in ways that they have never experienced. Land degradation, drought and a changing climate threaten the biodiversity of tribal lands and other lands that communities depend on for their survival and livelihoods. These treasured places provide identity, strength, cultural connection that shapes us all yet increasingly intense storms, hotter temperatures and drought threaten some of the most sacred and ecologically sensitive areas of the country.

Solution

- The Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps and corps across the country can mobilize thousands of young people through a Civilian Climate Corps to improve and build resilient ecosystems. A CCC can improve fish and game habitat, plant trees, enhance and improve wetlands, remove invasive species, and conduct resource surveys and analysis to protect sensitive and critical habitat. Emphasis should be placed on solutions that stem from, land-based traditionally ecological knowledge and Indigenous lifeways and Indigenous peoples should be leaders in developing solutions to this challenge.



Catastrophic Wildfire

Problem

- Forests are degrading and have not been managed to protect communities from catastrophic wildfire. Tree mortality rates have doubled in western National Parks from drought and bark beetles as the threat of wildfire continues to grow. Wildfires are burning hotter and bigger destroying watersheds, habitat, and communities.

Solution

- The Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps and corps across the country can mobilize thousands of young people through a Civilian Climate corps to help to improve forest health and management. A CCC can treat and improve hundreds of thousands of acres through fire fuel reduction, prescribed burning and help rehabilitate burned areas to protect waterways and streams.

Increasing Food Deserts, lack of access to fresh, healthy, food

Problem

- The remote locations of many tribal nations, current economic conditions coupled with increasing drought has created food deserts, or areas where indigenous people have limited access to a variety of healthful foods.

Solution

- Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps has operated a Traditional Farm Corps in the Pueblo of Acoma since 2011, reconnecting young people to the culture and traditions surrounding farming, while providing free, healthy produce to the community and managing seed banks for community use and the propagation of these landrace varieties. ALCC and corps across the country can mobilize thousands of young people through a Civilian Climate Corps to build Community Agriculture Programs utilizing traditional ecological knowledge and modern irrigation techniques to provide healthy food options while also preserving and reconnecting young people to culture and tradition.

Accelerated Loss of Culturally Significant Places

Problem

- Severe weather conditions brought on by climate change such as drought and floods have resulted in accelerated degradation of cultural sites.

Solution

- The Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps and corps across the country can mobilize hundreds of Indigenous young people to assist in the historic preservation of these culturally significant places, ensuring they remain for future generations.



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The current relationships and partnerships we have with Pueblos and Tribes, Federal and State agencies, municipalities, and community-based organizations uniquely position ALCC and other conservation corps to serve as the model from which to build a modern day CCC. The infrastructure, expertise and collaboration needed to meet the needs of a 21st Century Civilian Climate Corps is in place and exists in the modern-day corps movement.

Critical Barriers

Many conservation corps participants are called to participate by a desire to have a transformative or unique experience during a gap year, after they graduate college, or while they try to figure out what their next steps are going to be. I had a similar experience, as I was looking to gain clarity on the direction I wanted to take in my life after graduating college. I had no intention of making conservation my career, but rather was looking to “get my hands dirty” doing important environmental work. Many ALCC participants do not come searching for an enlightening or transformative experience, but rather come to us looking for a job that will help them pay their bills, support their families, and gain much needed training and experience to help them find long-term employment.

We regularly hear from our participants that Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps was the first place they feel like they belonged, the first time they felt like they had a safe space to be themselves and to contribute to something greater than themselves, and the place where they felt like they were able to learn and grow. We also see participants who leave the program early to take higher paying jobs. After all, a sense of belonging does not put food on the table or diapers on babies.

Due to matching funds requirements in most of our federal agreements, as well as AmeriCorps regulations and available funding, we are hampered in our ability to provide high wages to our participants. Many are stretching their weekly living allowances of \$330 - \$450 as far as they can to provide for themselves and their families. Young people who are engaging in critical efforts to protect our lands and waters deserve to be compensated at rates that support their financial well-being. We need to raise these positions up as they represent clear examples of how national service needs to be valued, on par with other careers based in community service, including members of our military, law enforcement officers, fire fighters, and legislators. Participation in conservation corps is a great way to serve our country, and we have the opportunity to provide participants with a living wage of \$15/hour, which will also have far-reaching impacts on our local economies while helping our young people build a foundation for future economic success.

In raising the weekly living allowances and wages of corps participants, we will also need to address the match requirements in our federal agreements by creating waivers or reducing the amount of match that Public Land Corps programs are required to provide to 10% or lower (there is currently a 25% match requirement). Additionally, the maximum living allowances set by AmeriCorps will need to be raised to allow for these higher rates. Raising wages will work to create more equitable opportunities in the conservation movement, broadening not only who can participate in these programs, but also the diversity of voices and ideas that we bring to solve the critical issue of climate change. Another challenge that many of our participants face is access to childcare. We have worked to create



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programming that is accessible to parents of young children by offering day crews and locally based crew and individual placement opportunities.

Investing in Tomorrow's Success Today

In addition to the impacts corps programs have on our participants, communities, and the environment, we also prepare our young people for future success through personal and professional development programming. ALCC has innovated several programs and initiatives that meet our participants where they are while helping them gain critical skills that support their academic, professional, and personal success. Innovation, community engagement, local solutions to worldwide challenges and collaboration is critical to success. Locally based corps can offer solutions to help meet these pressing needs. A Civilian Climate Corps connected to communities, fueled through partnerships and innovation will help build healthy and resilient landscapes while training the next generation of stewards.

Examples of Community Based Conservation Corps Innovation

- In Albuquerque, we partner with La Plazita Institute to operate a High School Equivalency Degree (GED) program. Participants spend 4 days a week completing local conservation projects and 1 day a week working with tutors and mentors to earn their GED. Studies show that earning a High School Equivalency Degree increases wages by 150% and decreases unemployment by 1.5 points (*Bureau of Labor*).
- In Zuni, we are partnering with Western Colorado University, the Friends of Cedar Mesa, and the Conservation Lands Foundation to pilot a Bears Ears Field School, in which ALCC participants will work with WCU graduate students to develop a co-management of public lands curriculum, while completing important cultural resource protection projects and earning university credit.
- We have developed an Ecological Restoration Certificate program in partnership with Professor Kevin Grady, where 5 Diné (Navajo) participants will earn up to 9 credits from Coconino Community College (CCC), technical certifications in chainsaw use and herbicide application, and an industry-recognized certificate in Ecological Restoration, backed by ALCC, CCC, The Nature Conservancy, The National Forest Foundation, and the United States Forest Service. The program will help open doors for Indigenous participants to pursue education and careers in the natural resource protection and ecological restoration industries.
- This year will also see our pilot of multiple apprenticeship programs. Partnering with the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Center (HPTC), we will hire multiple Indigenous HPTC Apprentices to gain valuable training, experience, and mentorship in the historic preservation field that will help them enter into a career with NPS, other federal agencies, and in the non-profit sector. And at the Southwest's first urban National Wildlife Refuge, we will

partner with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to pilot a Maintenance Worker Apprenticeship, creating additional career pathways for our young people.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit last year, the national unemployment rate escalated for all Americans to a dismal 14.5 percent. Native workers had been particularly hit hard, with an unemployment rate of 26% almost twice the national average. Unfortunately, this disparity between the Native and non-Native employment rates existed long before the pandemic hit in 2020. In some indigenous communities in the United States, the unemployment rate has consistently ranged from 20 percent to 80 percent. (Miller, 2021) For indigenous youth and young adults these numbers are estimated to be even higher. A Civilian Climate Corps will close the gap by providing good paying jobs, career readiness training, apprenticeships, and industry recognized certifications for Indigenous youth and young adults. Ultimately indigenous youth are going to be saddled with the long-term consequences associated with climate change. By developing the Civilian Climate Corps in local indigenous communities, we can increase both traditional and cultural scientific knowledge and put more Native youth on a natural resource career pathway where they can then apply their education and skills in service to their tribe.

Recommendations

- Build upon the current relationships and success that current Conservation Corps have in implementing programming and projects to develop the Civilian Climate Corps
- Provide funds for work that creates more resilient Tribal lands while also providing increased support for projects on adjacent public lands.
- Address barriers to participation by low-income participants by increasing living allowances to \$15/hour and increasing the maximum AmeriCorps stipend to allow for greater flexibility in compensation
- Required match amounts must be lowered or removed for Public Land Corps programs to ensure Corps programs can meet requirements while raising stipends and compensation
- Provide funding to complete important projects on the ground while also investing in the people doing the work through personal and professional development opportunities and support
- Provide capacity building funding to Corps programs to support ramp up of programs and services
- Support inclusion of Indigenous voices and communities to create solutions to Climate Change crisis

Conclusion

I never dreamed of making a career in conservation when I first joined the Desert Restoration Corps in 2006. Fifteen years later I find myself continuously inspired by the people who do this work, the places we work in, and the impacts that corps programs have on our environment, our communities, and the participants we serve. The Civilian Climate Corps has the potential to grow these impacts in ways previously not realized. We can expand current Corps programs to engage even more young people in important national service programs that make our communities more resilient. We can catalyze



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programs in new communities and bring in new generations of conservationists. Let us continue the excellence that corps programs have had since the creation of the first CCC during the Great Depression with the creation of a Civilian Climate Corps that leads the way for the next generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this critically important issue.

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