



# COLORADO YOUTH CORPS ASSOCIATION

## **Testimony of Scott Segerstrom, Executive Director of the Colorado Youth Corps Association House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands On “Examining the Potential for a Civilian Climate Corps”**

### **Introduction:**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the vital role of conservation service corps in President Biden’s Civilian Climate Corps initiative. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my insight on how our sector can transform even more lives and communities through this initiative and mitigate the impacts of climate change on our country.

My name is Scott Segerstrom and I am the Executive Director of the Colorado Youth Corps Association. I work on behalf of the 8 accredited conservation service corps in the state which collectively engage more than 1,700 corps members on land, water, and energy conservation projects.

### **Climate Change in Colorado:**

Colorado’s changing climate is affecting lives and livelihoods across the state. From mudslides to warmer rivers to flooded communities, mitigating the effects of climate change on our environment is a critical priority. The increased frequency and intensity of wildfires poses our most pressing immediate threat and we are coming off a heartbreaking year in which more than 1,000 fires ignited.

In the past 30 years, Colorado’s climate has become substantially warmer. Statewide annual average temperatures have already increased by two degrees Fahrenheit over the past 30 years and the current climate models project up to another five degrees Fahrenheit by 2050. An example of this trend can be seen in Colorado’s snowpack, which has been below average since 2000 in all of Colorado’s river basins.

The urgency and sheer scope of these challenges requires an efficient, proven solution with an extensive infrastructure in-place. Conservation service corps are well-positioned to be a central strategy of the Civilian Climate Corps to save the lives and livelihoods of millions of Americans.

### **Corps Today:**

Corps have their roots in the Great Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. Like that storied program, our members are stewarding our public lands and waters. More than 130 corps and 20,000 corps members participate yearly on projects addressing the effects of climate change such as wildfire mitigation, flood mitigation and restoration, removal of invasive species, and much more.

Unlike the original CCC, which limited opportunities for people of color and did not include women, our corps programs focus on inclusion and strive to reflect the faces of their local communities. Here in Colorado approximately 25% of our corps members belong to an ethnic minority, 40% come from low-income backgrounds, and 25% had no prior work experience. We are proud of our progress but acknowledge more work remains in recruiting participants from traditionally excluded communities.

### **Civilian Climate Corps Program and Workforce Development through Corps:**

Utilizing conservation service corps to meet the vision of a national Civilian Climate Corps will not only protect public land but will also result in outstanding job creation. Members serving in a corps receive valuable industry-standard professional certifications such as wildland firefighting, chainsaw operations, and herbicide application for invasive species along with medical certifications including Wilderness First Aid, Wilderness First Responder, and Mental Health First Aid.

In addition to the professional credentials and hands-on experience, corps members also experience significant personal development. External evaluations demonstrate that serving in a corps increases civic engagement, self-responsibility, critical thinking, and leadership among other positive developments; and that members undergo meaningful growth in their interests in obtaining additional education and confidence in their ability to gain employment upon corps graduation.

These elite credentials, matched with leadership development and valuable hands-on experience, pave the way for the corps-to-career transition at a time when youth and young adults need employment and the response to climate change is opening up new opportunities.

A prime example of expanding career entry-points due to climate change is the wildland firefighting sector. The modern era of wildfires increasing in size and intensity now requires a larger workforce that is in-place year-round. President Biden's recently outlined the goal of building a permanent, year-round firefighting force and dramatically increasing the number of available firefighters.

These strategies are being utilized in my state right now. Colorado's Department of Fire Prevention and Control is moving away from the traditional model of overworked seasonal wildland firefighters towards a permanent workforce, and their strategic plan calls for an overall increase in firefighters. In addition, the Colorado Department of Natural Resources estimates the state needs ten times more people employed in forestry and wildfire mitigation work.

Colorado corps are well-positioned to meet this emerging employment need: in the last three years, we have graduated 175 fully-trained wildland firefighters and 699 certified chainsaw operators, commonly known as sawyers. Many of these members were participants in the Veteran Fire Corps program which transitions newly-discharged military veterans into the wildland firefighting sector for their next chapter in service. Our fellow corps around the country are producing thousands of highly-trained firefighters and sawyers as well to meet this national need.

A Civilian Climate Corps program built through conservation service corps will result in progress in diversifying the wildland fire sector. Corps have the ability to recruit new sawyers and wildland firefighter trainees from their local communities—including from disinvested and underrepresented populations. One example of this approach is our Women's Fire Corps Program that recruits cohorts of young women to form forest fuels reduction chainsaw crews that provide experience in an inclusive and supportive environment.

In Colorado, similar to other states, outdoor recreation has become a primary component of our state economy. In 2019 outdoor activities supported 511,000 jobs—more than 18% of the labor force—and generated 10% of the entire state Gross Domestic Product. However, climate change, in the form of wildfires, floods, and other harmful effects, threatens this economic pillar. Last year the two largest fires in state history, the Cameron Peak Fire and the East Troublesome Fire, combined to close 68 trailheads and more than 500 miles of trail for weeks. Climate-driven impacts such as these are devastating to the outdoor recreation economy, which is often the backbone of economic development in rural communities.

Conservation service corps are a key partner in this industry. Thousands of corps members build and maintain the outdoor recreation infrastructure and we develop their next generation of outdoor industry employees, entrepreneurs, and patrons.

Climate-focused workforce development by corps is not limited to public lands. For example, in Colorado, crews based in Denver and Fort Collins receive certifications in performing energy audits and then deploy to the homes of low-income residents. They install high-efficiency toilets, shower aerators, LED light bulbs, insulate hot water heaters, and perform other improvements aimed to conserving energy and water while lowering utility bills and putting the residents on the path to economic independence.

In addition, Colorado Youth Corps Association founded the Careers in Natural Resources Initiative. This is a statewide effort to build pathways to employment in the natural resource sector for youth and young adults regardless of background or education level. We particularly focus on raising awareness of the myriad of natural resource careers that exist beyond the field-based, scientific jobs. We focus on the message that “you don’t have to work IN the outdoors to work FOR the outdoors” and help corps members find the right opportunity that matches their passion and strengths, whether that is wildland firefighting, grant management, public relations, or the hundreds of other natural resource careers.

A Civilian Climate Corps program built on the infrastructure of conservation service corps will result in a modernization of the natural resources workforce that will result in a lifetime of returns. Corps have a proven track record of graduating highly-trained, well-developed corps members who will become the next generation of professionals and stewards of our iconic public lands.

### **Build the CCC From Strength, Not From Scratch:**

Corps have the infrastructure, capacity, and experience to serve as the foundation from which to launch the new Civilian Climate Corps. The Corps Network, the national association of service and conservation corps, is a network of more than 130 corps operating in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories. Colorado Youth Corps Association is a member of this network. This network of corps, with decades of experience, is uniquely positioned to ensure the CCC demonstrates immediate impact in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Corps have existing, trusted relationships with land management agencies and other key stakeholders involved in climate change mitigation. We have decades of experience in partnering with the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to plan and execute conservation projects. A 2019 national evaluation of corps by North Carolina State University found that land management

personnel who partnered with corps completed 42% more of the fire fuel work by acreage than they planned to accomplish when compared to personnel not working with corps.

Corps execute missions ranging from focused, one-week projects to multi-year, landscape-scale initiatives. For example, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, based in Steamboat Springs, just commenced a \$500,000, multi-year recovery and restoration project to address the devastating effects of the East Troublesome Fire. The burn scar from this 193,000-acre fire includes Grand Lake, the western gateway town to Rocky Mountain National Park. The corps is partnering with the US Forest Service as well as state and local entities and expects to deploy more than 100 corps members over the next two years for at least 50 weeks service. The extensive project scope includes rebuilding damaged trails improving trail drainage in anticipation of massive erosion; flood mitigation; hazard tree removal; and watershed protection in anticipation of the threat of fire-damaged soil and sediment flowing into the Colorado River, Willow Creek, and other waterways that are the lifeblood of the community.

AmeriCorps programs, such as ours, stand ready to grow as more resources become available. Our decades-long involvement with AmeriCorps is a key asset in President Biden's Civilian Climate Corps program reaching its full potential. Funding and support from AmeriCorps provides additional capacity and resources for corps. AmeriCorps provides the infrastructure to recruit members from marginalized and disinvested communities, provide workforce development and career readiness training, and deploy thousands of AmeriCorps members on public land projects and access AmeriCorps Segal education awards for members to use on future education or existing student loan debt.

My organization, Colorado Youth Corps Association, holds the two largest AmeriCorps grants in the state including "Colorado Climate Corps": a \$1.7 million, 240-member program annually that launches next year aimed at engaging young adult Coloradans in climate change-focused service projects across the state such as wildfire mitigation, riparian restoration, and energy and water weatherization and retrofitting in low-income households. "Colorado Climate Corps" is in addition to our flagship \$1.7 million, 500-member AmeriCorps program which also includes these climate-focused service activities.

### **Recommendations:**

As this Subcommittee and Congress discuss the mission and benefits of President Biden's Civilian Climate Corps program, Colorado Youth Corps Association urges you to consider the following:

- 1) Utilize the existing network of qualified conservation service corps as the foundation for the new Civilian Climate Corps
- 2) Provide funding and support for capacity-building of corps programs
- 3) Provide funding and support for workforce development to meet the unique challenges posed by climate change
- 4) Develop and implement a simplified and streamlined grant application and project agreement process
- 5) A match waiver for the Public Land Corps program

**Conclusion:**

In closing, Colorado Youth Corps Association, our 8 accredited member corps, and our 1,700 youth, young adults, and military veterans commend the Committee for their time and effort on an issue that demands urgent intervention.

A Civilian Climate Corps, built on the shoulders of the conservation service corps network, has the potential to change the trajectory of millions of lives. Members graduate from our corps with greater self-esteem, they become first-generation college graduates, they find their purpose in service to others, and they continue to improve the world in their next chapter in life. The CCC program will focus their passion, energy, and brilliance on the existential crisis of this generation. A CCC-conservation corps partnership represents the best of government: channeling resources into an efficient, proven solution that will be of service to all Americans.

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