

**Testimony of Mary Ellen Sprenkel, President & CEO of The Corps Network
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Forum
On “The Restoration Economy: Examining Environmental and Economic Opportunities”**

July 7, 2020

Introduction

Chairwoman Haaland, Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon and thank you for hosting today’s forum on how the restoration economy can and should be part of the Nation’s response to COVID-19, and the resulting economic downturn and increase in unemployment. 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.

Corps Today

Today’s Corps are primarily community-based non-profit organizations. They are diverse and versatile and reflect the needs of the communities in which they serve. 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. Interns provide visitor services such as educational programming and translation assistance, and agency support like research and planning.

In urban areas, Corps create parks, playgrounds, greenspaces and urban gardens. They install green infrastructure including solar panels; energy efficient heating, cooling and water systems; green roofs; rain gardens and permeable surfaces. And many Corps across the country 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, Corps like Rocky Mountain Youth Corps in Taos, NM; the Arizona Conservation Corps in Flagstaff, AZ; Kupu in

Hawaii; and the Detroit Conservation Corps in MI, all provide essential services in their respective communities.

Corpsmembers

Collectively these Corps engage nearly 25,000 young adults annually. Corpsmembers, like the communities they serve, are very diverse. In 2019, 46 percent of Corpsmembers identified as female and 44 percent identified as persons of color. Corpsmembers come from across the spectrum of education level and socioeconomic status. And the split between urban, rural, and suburban Corpsmembers is relatively even.

Although Corps, Corpsmembers, and project work can be very diverse, all Corps share several things in common. Like their legacy, the Civilian Conservation Corps, they all provide opportunities for: education, work readiness, leadership development, conservation service, and civic engagement.

Context and Need for Expansion

Nearly a century ago, the United States faced several crises at the same time: The Great Depression; the unemployment of nearly 25 percent of the working age population; widespread poverty; environmental issues like drought, erosion, and wildfire; and a need for improved infrastructure. Sound familiar?

In response to these challenges, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC employed 3 million young men; built more than 125,000 miles of road, 47,000 bridges; 318 dams, and 3,000 fire towers; planted nearly 3 billion trees; and developed 854 state and 94 national parks. The result was of a generation of young men prepared to serve their country in World War II, create one of the strongest economies in our nation's history, and build infrastructure and public land systems that still exist today.

Fast forward to today. The current unemployment rate for young adults is above 20 percent – and even higher for Black and Hispanic young adults; federal, state, and local resource management agencies collectively face upwards of \$50 billion in deferred maintenance; and communities across the country are ill-prepared for the impacts of climate change and the catastrophic storms that result. Further, these same communities are struggling to find ways to undo decades – centuries, really – of systemic racism, economic oppression, and environmental injustice.

It is no surprise then, that once again, Americans are calling for a bold, large-scale solution – a modern day CCC. 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.

Expansion under ARRA

It worked in the 1930s, and it worked again, on a smaller scale in 2009 through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). 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 the Montana Conservation Corps 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. The Indian Youth Service Corps, which you will hear about from my colleague momentarily, is one such example.

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 easily addressed in a future economic stimulus and job creation package.

Recommendations

Therefore, as this Committee and Congress discuss the important benefits of including the restoration and outdoor recreation economy as part of a COVID-19 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 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 that the restoration and outdoor recreation economies 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.