



## **Prepared Statement of**

**Tate Watkins  
Research Fellow  
Property and Environment Research Center**

**U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources – Subcommittee on National Parks,  
Forests, and Public Lands  
Hearing on “Examining the Potential for a Civilian Climate Corps”**

**July 20, 2021**

### **Main Points:**

- There is a need to significantly increase active conservation and restoration on federal lands. PERC’s research identifies some of the obstacles that hinder such efforts.
- Corps programs do good work in engaging young people on outdoor projects but have limited ability to solve key obstacles to conservation, such as regulatory uncertainty that hamstrings federal agencies, poorly aligned incentives that lead to neglect of public lands, or litigation risks that make restoration of forests or mines unfeasible.
- Reforms to address these barriers and engage the private sector would improve our ability to conserve and restore public lands and promote a robust conservation economy.

### **Introduction**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the potential for a Civilian Climate Corps. My name is Tate Watkins, and I am a research fellow at the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), a conservation research institute based in Bozeman, Montana. For 40 years, PERC’s research has generated and explored market-based solutions to conservation challenges. My work at PERC has focused on ways to enhance stewardship of our public lands and wildlife.

I previously served in the Peace Corps in Senegal, an indelible experience that helped shape me personally and professionally. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I benefited firsthand from the opportunities and life experiences that corps programs provide, albeit in a different context from a domestic corps program.

While few details about the Civilian Climate Corps concept are available as of yet, President Biden’s executive order proposing the initiative suggests the first goal will be “to conserve and restore public lands and waters.”<sup>1</sup> This is an important goal. In pursuing it, however, we should

---

<sup>1</sup> Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, § 215 (Jan. 20, 2021).

be mindful of the challenges our public lands face, the sources of those challenges, and the limits of what a corps program can accomplish in light of existing obstacles. Whether a new corps program is established, existing programs are expanded, or something else is initiated, we must improve several policies and procedures to ensure conservation and resilience efforts can make a lasting difference on the ground.

### **The need for more active conservation and restoration of public lands**

Federal agencies face mounting conservation challenges, including a worsening wildfire crisis and neglected public land maintenance. These challenges will not resolve themselves but require active effort to conserve and restore our public lands. PERC's research has demonstrated not only the need for this work but also the obstacles that hinder federal land managers, states, tribes, and the private sector from accomplishing this work.

Much attention has justly been given to catastrophic effects of wildfires and their threat to national forests and other public lands. There is also broad agreement that the only way to tackle this problem in the short term is to significantly increase the scale of forest restoration efforts. The Forest Service [reports](#) a backlog of 80 million acres in need of restoration and 63 million acres facing high or very high risk of fire. At the current pace of restoration, it will take decades to clear this backlog, all the while leaving air and water quality, ecosystems, and communities at risk. PERC's recent report [Fix America's Forests: Reforms to Restore National Forests and Tackle the Wildfire Crisis](#) describes obstacles that limit the pace and scale of forest restoration on the ground.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it highlights the need to better engage states, tribes, and the private sector to help accomplish the effort.

There has also been much attention on the strain that record visitation imposes on national parks and other federal recreation lands. Increased visitation and interest in outdoor recreation demonstrates the value and importance of such resources. But it has come at a cost to our parks and other lands. The National Park Service alone [faces](#) a nearly \$12 billion maintenance backlog, including care for 21,000 miles of trails and 25,000 buildings. The [Great American Outdoors Act](#) of 2020 will fund a portion of deferred maintenance needs up to \$9.5 billion, but the effort is spread across all federal lands and will be funded for only five years. As PERC [research has found](#), such measures, while helpful, do not address the [underlying neglect](#) that gave rise to the backlog and will not alone keep it from recurring.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Holly Fretwell and Jonathan Wood, *Fix America's Forests: Reforms to Restore National Forests and Tackle the Wildfire Crisis*, PERC Public Lands Report (April 2021), <https://perc.org/2021/04/12/fix-americas-forests-reforms-to-restore-national-forests-and-tackle-the-wildfire-crisis/>.

<sup>3</sup> Shawn Regan et al., *Breaking the Backlog: 7 Ideas to Address the National Park Deferred Maintenance Problem*, PERC Public Lands Report (February 2016), <https://www.perc.org/2016/02/16/breaking-the-backlog/>; Tate Watkins, *Fixing National Park Maintenance For the Long Haul*, PERC Policy Brief (November 2020).

Similar stories of conservation needs can be told regarding water, wildlife, abandoned mine cleanup, and countless other environmental areas.<sup>4</sup> President Biden’s [call](#) to “conserve and restore public lands and waters, bolster community resilience, increase reforestation, increase carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protect biodiversity, improve access to recreation, and address the changing climate” is certainly timely. The question, then, is if a Civilian Climate Corps can best achieve these worthy goals, to what extent, and at what cost.

### **The Civilian Climate Corps concept**

Various corps programs are successful getting young people outdoors and engaging them in local communities through conservation projects. Last year, corps network members restored more than [333,000](#) acres of habitat and constructed or improved more than [12,000](#) miles of trails. Existing programs certainly play a role in caring for the great outdoors. The question now is what might we expect from an expansion or addition of conservation corps programs through a Civilian Climate Corps.

Part of the challenge in examining the potential for a Civilian Climate Corps is the uncertainty over what such a program will look like, a challenge noted by the Congressional Research Service.<sup>5</sup> On January 27, 2021, President Biden issued [Executive Order 14008](#), “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” in which he directed the secretary of the interior, in collaboration with the secretary of agriculture and other agency heads, to create a strategy for a Civilian Climate Corps. The administration has yet to release its proposal, but it did include a recommendation for a \$10 billion investment in the initiative as part of its March 2021 [American Jobs Plan](#) proposal and requested \$200 million for the initiative in the [FY2022 discretionary budget request](#) for the Department of the Interior.

There are also similar legislative proposals under consideration. Chairman Neguse and Senator Wyden, for example, have introduced the [21st Century Conservation Corps Act](#). The bill would put \$40 billion toward conservation-related projects and jobs, including establishing a \$9 billion fund for qualified land and conservation corps.

There are currently two primary federal corps programs related to conserving and restoring public lands and waters: Youth Conservation Corps and the Public Lands Corps. There is also a broader Job Corps program administered by the Department of Labor that contains a conservation component. Specifically, two dozen existing Job Corps training centers [focus](#) on

---

<sup>4</sup> For examples, see: Reed Watson, *Tapping Water Markets in California: Six Policy Reforms*, PERC Policy Brief (October 2016), <https://www.perc.org/2016/10/17/tapping-water-markets-in-california-six-policy-reforms/>; Jonathan Wood, *The Road to Recovery: How Restoring the Endangered Species Act’s Two-Step Process Can Prevent Extinction and Promote Recovery*, PERC Policy Report (April 2018), <https://www.perc.org/2018/04/24/the-road-to-recovery/>; Jonathan Wood, *Prospecting for Pollution: The Need for Better Incentives to Clean Up Abandoned Mines*, PERC Public Lands Report (February 2020), <https://www.perc.org/2020/02/11/prospecting-for-pollution-the-need-for-better-incentives-to-clean-up-abandoned-mines/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cong. Res. Serv., *Biden Admin. Proposes New Civilian Climate Corps* (May 3, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11654>.

conserving, developing, or managing Forest Service lands. Furthermore, AmeriCorps grant programs [support](#) a number of conservation projects. The Obama administration also established the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, an interagency initiative aimed at expanding opportunities and funding for youth employment and training on public lands and operated primarily by non-federal partners.

As this committee and the broader conservation community looks to promote conservation work on the ground, it's worth evaluating how to effectively and efficiently increase conservation capacity while also addressing the underlying causes that led to conservation problems in the first place. While the Biden administration has not yet released a specific climate corps proposal, there are various elements that should be weighed.

There is already an extensive corps network that is successful in engaging young people on conservation projects. Policymakers should first consider the opportunities available within this existing framework or ways to reduce restrictions on existing corps before creating new programs or additional layers of bureaucracy using taxpayer dollars. Moreover, the more numerous and complex corps programs are, the harder it may be for applicants to navigate them and find the right potential fit.

It is also worth noting that many corps positions are widely viewed as gap-years or temporary positions for young people, not necessarily long-term jobs or career starters. Many of the programs referenced in Civilian Climate Corps discussions, including Chairman Neguse's proposal mentioned above, rely on the "qualified youth or conservation corps" [definition](#) of "individuals between the ages of 16 and 30, inclusive, or veterans age 35 or younger" from the Public Land Corps Act of 1993. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it should be taken into consideration when evaluating whether a Civilian Climate Corps program will create a conservation labor force.

### **Laying the groundwork for more effective conservation**

Even if Congress commits funding for a conservation corps, it would not have addressed the underlying issues that have created such a backlog of conservation needs on public lands. The United States faces mounting challenges related to conservation and climate resilience. In conversations over the Civilian Climate Corps, it is necessary to consider the work corps can accomplish as well as their limitations and the need for additional or alternative solutions that enhance conservation capabilities. Now is the time to ensure our conservation efforts are effective and efficient, whether undertaken by corps members or otherwise.

One such approach is to reduce regulatory red tape that consumes time and resources while making it more difficult to get conservation done on the ground. This is widely seen in forest restoration efforts. For instance, many policymakers agree that increasing prescribed burns is an important step in combating wildfire risk, yet federal regulations hinder states' and tribes' ability to manage forests with controlled burns. As PERC scholars explain in [Fix America's Forests](#), smoke from prescribed burns should be excluded from state emission calculations under the Clean Air Act, in effect crediting them for avoiding worse air pollution from a later wildfire.

Additionally, regulatory hurdles make it difficult for forest restoration projects to be approved so that groups, such as corps programs, can actually conduct the work on the ground. The NEPA process and resulting uncertainties can unnecessarily complicate and delay restoration project planning. Increasing acreage limits for categorical exclusions and clarifying vague standards regarding such exclusions for wildfire resilience projects would help federal agencies move through the planning process so that crews can rapidly get to work on thinning, repairs, or other resilience projects.

Legislators also have the opportunity to improve how we fund conservation, with potential to harness private dollars. At a time when conservation funding is [stretched thin](#), a Civilian Climate Corps offers a potential way to justify more appropriations for conservation and related agencies. Yet appropriators must also face the realities of a mounting federal debt and competing priorities for taxpayer funding. The good news is there is potential to generate new conservation funding streams through users and private entities.

Recreational user fee revenues are one way to enhance conservation funding. Under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), public lands sites are able to retain 80 percent of their fee collections to be spent at the site without further appropriation. As my research on [Enhancing the Public Lands Recreation Fee System](#) has noted, fee revenues have risen by about 40 percent over the past five years, from \$316 million to \$442 million.<sup>6</sup> There is potential to expand this system and generate more income for conservation through reforms, including by empowering all federal land agencies to charge entry fees or implementing a surcharge for overseas visitors who do not currently support public lands through taxes. Other innovative ideas, such as a “recreation stamp” that dedicates proceeds to federal recreation purposes—akin to the way that hunters and anglers fund conservation when they purchase licenses, stamps, or equipment—would make worthwhile experiments to increase dedicated funding.

Another funding opportunity is to better engage the private sector in financing restoration projects. The [forest resilience bond](#) is one such example that could be expanded to bring private finance opportunities to forest restoration projects. This financial tool brings in investors who provide capital for the upfront costs of a restoration project, which is passed on to a project manager who completes the restoration as planned and approved by the Forest Service. Once the work is completed, investors are paid back over time by various beneficiaries. Promoting these sorts of programs and projects that bring in private investment will help expand conservation work while also reducing upfront costs to the federal government.

Building a modern conservation economy also means improving public-private partnerships. Corps do a great job of bringing in groups of people to complete specific projects, but most corps members do not remain in the surrounding communities once their term is completed. At a time when many areas of the country are facing worker shortages, contracting with local, private companies to complete restoration or conservation resilience efforts—while maintaining public

---

<sup>6</sup> Tate Watkins, *Enhancing the Public Lands Recreation Fee System*, PERC Policy Brief (November 2020), <https://www.perc.org/2020/11/18/enhancing-public-lands-recreation-fee-system/>.

ownership and oversight—is a way to encourage entrepreneurship, job creation, and innovation. PERC [research on deferred maintenance needs](#) has also found that public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects and routine maintenance needs save the government money and ensure work is completed in a timely manner.

### **Conclusion**

Now is the time to improve how we solve environmental challenges. Corps programs do great work engaging young people on outdoor projects, and that certainly deserves to be recognized. Corps programs are limited, however, in their ability to resolve obstacles that hinder broader conservation and restoration efforts.

Efforts to expand our nation's conservation capacity and bolster its climate resilience must also include reforms to address these barriers and engage the private sector. In removing red tape and promoting private partnerships, policymakers can make it easier for conservationists, including corps members, to conduct lasting restoration and resilience improvements on the ground.