

TESTIMONY OF JEFF PARKER,
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EUGENE, OREGON

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here to testify in support of HR 2875, the Public Lands Corps Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2005. I want to thank Representatives Walden and Udall for their leadership in this process and acknowledge the key roles played in the Senate by Senators Bingaman, Domenici, and Feinstein.

I am the Administrative Director of the Northwest Youth Corps (NYC). The NYC is headquartered in Oregon but also does work in Idaho, Washington State, and California. I am also testifying on behalf of the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps (NASCC) which represents the corps movement in Washington and consists of more than 100 corps, enrolling 23,000 corpsmembers in 37 states and the District of Columbia. I have attached detailed descriptions of the NYC and NASCC for the record.

Because this bill differs in certain key respects from earlier versions, I will summarize its key provisions. First, it authorizes the Interior and Agriculture Secretaries to enter into contracts or cooperative agreements with conservation corps to carry out appropriate conservation projects which are defined as “any project for the conservation, restoration, construction or rehabilitation of natural, cultural, historic, archeological, recreational, or scenic resources.”

Second, it establishes a priority for projects that will reduce the risk of wildfire to a community, municipal water supply, or other at-risk Federal land; protect watersheds or address threats to the health of forests and rangeland; address the impact of insect or disease infestation or other damaging agents; and protect, restore, and enhance components of forest ecosystems to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species, improve biological diversity, and enhance productivity and carbon sequestration.

It also establishes two preferences. For appropriate conservation projects, the Secretary “may” give preference to a qualified corps that has a substantial portion of members who are economically, physically, or educationally disadvantaged. For priority projects, the Secretary “shall, to the maximum extent practicable” give preference to a qualified corps that has a substantial portion of members who are economically, physically, or educationally disadvantaged.

Fourth, it gives the Secretary discretion to grant credit for time served in the Public Lands Corps toward future Federal hiring and to provide non-competitive hiring status for Corps alumni for up to 120 days.

Fifth, the government may not pay more than 75 percent of the cost of any project. The remaining 25 percent may be provided in cash or in-kind from nonfederal sources.

Finally, it authorizes \$15 million per year, of which \$10 million is to carry out priority projects.

Based on the Northwest Youth Corps’ work and reports from my colleagues around the country, it is clear that corps have an important role to play in preventing forest fires and other natural disasters, providing appropriate assistance to communities threatened by such disasters, and helping them recover from the devastation that occurs.

As of July 6, nine states – Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Washington – had reported large, active fires. About 324 large fires have been contained this year. In addition to these large fires, the National Interagency Fire Center reported that almost 32,000 fires have consumed about three million acres since January 1. In 2004, some 77,534 reported fires burned 6,790,692 acres. Federal government agencies spent \$890 million to suppress them.

In 2004 the National Fire News noted that “as firefighters control wildland fires, another group of quiet heroes move into the area to start the healing. After a wildland fire, the land may need stabilization to prevent loss of topsoil through erosion and prevent the movement of dirt into rivers and streams. Land management specialists and volunteers jump start the renewal of plant life through seeding and planting with annuals, trees, and native species that help retain soils and fight invasive weeds. It’s a long term process that comes alive as the wildland fires die down.”

This is exactly the kind of work at which corps excel.

- In 2004, the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) completed over 600 acres of wildfire fuels reduction projects in partnership with Yellowstone National Park, with state agencies on private lands, and with local conservation districts. Its priority has been to create defensible space around historic buildings in the national parks and around campgrounds. At Big Hole National Historic Battlefield, MCC crews thinned areas of woodlands adjacent to national forest lands to protect the

cultural resources from catastrophic wildfires. In West Yellowstone, MCC partnered with the Chamber of Commerce to remove 300 hazardous trees lining the popular Rendezvous Ski Trails, site of national ski races, and an important economic asset in a community trying to diversify from the traditional snowmobile-based economy. MCC is working to sign agreements to work with BAER (Burned Area Emergency Recovery) teams to complete post-fire emergency restoration activities including erosion control, hazardous tree removal, tree planting, trail maintenance, and stream restoration.

- In 2004, NYC Corpsmembers built or maintained 448 miles of trail, pruned 105 acres of conifers, performed fuel reduction on 181 acres, planted 6,550 trees, and restored 28 acres of wetlands.
- In 2003, the Utah Conservation Corps did thinning in a wild land fire-urban interface zone outside of Park City that was a partnership between a homeowner's association and Utah Department of Forestry. In the past, it has carried out "soil stabilization" projects in the Bridger-Teton National Forest that included the rehabilitation and re-routing of trail in burn areas and building drainage structures.
- In 2003, the Youth Corps of Southern Arizona have partnered with Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, the Coronado National Forest, and Chiricahua National Monument. Corpsmembers cut and piled excess fuels in preparation for a burn as part of a hazardous fuel reduction project. They also thinned and removed trees for habitat improvement in the Apache-Sitgreaves. The YCOSA worked with Ramsay Canyon, a facility of The Nature Conservancy in southern Arizona to remove hazardous, flammable material from buildings. Work to create defensible space was conducted several weeks prior to a fire and the Corps has received credit for saving the buildings. Crews have also been sent to fires on BLM and USFS areas in Wyoming and Arizona.
- The Coconino Rural Environment Corps located in Flagstaff, Arizona thins hundreds of acres of federal, state, county, city, and private lands every year. The Corps has created multiple partnerships in local communities to mitigate the hazards of catastrophic wild fires. The Partnership also provided the local Native American Reservations with more than 400 cords of fire wood. Working with County and City Waste Management, the partnership found a way to transport fire wood to community members in need with little to no cost to the project. The partnerships have also increased community awareness to the dangers of wildfire and the risks that may be associated with living in one of the most fire prone forests in the world, thus creating a more fire wise community. The CREC thins more than 500 acres a year and returns more than 4000 acres to native grasslands. Forest restoration has also been a large portion of the forestry work CREC has done over the last several years.
- The Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC) has done access and egress in urban interface in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park housing area to insure safe passage for emergency response workers. Corpsmembers have been trained in firescaping around new suburban neighborhoods as cities spread into rural areas. They help to provide both visually aesthetic and fire resistant landscape around structures of value and along the avenues of emergency response.
- In 2003, the Minnesota Conservation Corps responded to 45 wildfires that totaled 30,656 acres. It completed 920 home and property assessments (fire wise) relating to wildfire danger and defensible space and made recommendations to the home owners on how to make their property safer in the event of a wildfire.

Corpsmembers also provided about 8,720 hours in indirect fire suppression activities including 5 miles of fire break construction, 400 acres of timber stand improvement, and 5,560 acres of prescribed burns. In any given year MCC plants 150,000 plus trees in areas that may or may not have been impacted by previous fires. MCC also completes 150 Forest Inventory Analysis (FIA) plots each year for the Minnesota Department of natural resources Division of Forestry. These plots are then used in a variety of Forestry models including a wildfire model.

Conservation Corps (CCC) is the nation's oldest, largest and longest-running youth conservation corps. Nearly 90,000 young men and women have worked more than 50 million hours to protect and enhance California's environment and communities and have provided six million hours of assistance with emergencies like fires, floods and earthquakes. Last June the CCC laid plastic and sandbags on Delta levees to prevent flooding; fought fires in Santa Barbara and Madera counties and surveyed for the glassy-winged sharpshooter (a major agricultural pest that has caused the loss of millions of dollars to wine grape growers). At the request of the San Joaquin County Office of Emergency Services and the state Department of Water Resources, 15 crews placed heavy plastic sheeting and sandbags to protect 13.5 miles of interior levees not designed to hold flood waters. Twelve Corps sent crews to fight floods. At the same time the CCC responded to the Delta levees, three crews were dispatched to the Gaviota Fire in Santa Barbara County. Corpsmembers also provided the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection with logistical support. As crews finished up with the Gaviota Fire, the CCC was called upon to respond to the Source Fire in the Sierra National Forest, under the direction of the U.S. Forest Service. Fresno and Pomona corpsmembers provided assistance at the fire camp.

As you can see from these examples, corps have experience working with federal, state, and local land management agencies. Indeed, the Forest Service invested \$4.2 million in partnerships with Corps and leveraged an additional \$2.4 million in match.

HR 2875 will provide the federal government with the resources necessary to continue to utilize corps and cost-effectively fight wildfires.

Invasive species are another large and growing threat to our public lands across the nation. Up to 46 percent of the plants and animals listed as endangered species by the federal government have been negatively affected by invasive species. Purple loosestrife diminishes waterfowl habitats, alters wetland structure and function, and chokes out native plants. The Asian longhorned beetle is causing the destruction of valuable city trees and could spread to forests. Nutria is devastating large portions of wetland ecosystems.

Invasive plants are estimated to infest 100 million acres in the United States. Every year, they spread across three million additional acres, an area twice the size of Delaware. According to a Bureau of Land Management study (1996) up to 4,600 acres of additional Federal public natural areas in the Western continental United States are negatively affected by invasive plant species every day. One report indicates that the economic cost of invasive species to Americans is an estimated \$137 billion every year.

Corps have also been mobilized in California, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, and elsewhere to fight invasive species; a growing problem on our public lands across the nation. For example:

- The Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC), based in Taos and the Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC), based in Grand Junction, Colorado, have been actively involved in tamarisk removal for several years. This year and last, the WCCC has partnered with the Colorado State Parks Department and the state Division of Wildlife, the Audubon Society, and the Tamarisk Coalition to control 28 acres of Tamarisk and Russian Olive, 7 acres of Hounds Tongue, Canada Thistle and other species, as well as 15 miles of Salsafy, Russian Thistle, Storcks Bill and other species.
- The Northwest Youth Corps removed noxious weeds from 1,537 acres.
- The Montana Conservation Corps is partnering with the National Forest Foundation, Gallatin National Forest, and Gallatin/Big Sky Weed Management Area Committee to undertake an extensive invasive weed mapping and removal project in the Lee Metcalf Wilderness. The project will include: creating an inventory (GPS/photos), hand-pulling, reseeding, biological controls and spot spraying of noxious weeds by a crew of seven young adults for four weeks at 12 trailheads, 24 backcountry campsites and along 124 miles of trails in the northern unit of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness. In 2003, in partnership with the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS), MCC floated sections of the Missouri Breaks Wild and Scenic River to inventory and map patches of invasive Leafy Spurge using hand-held GPS units and data loggers. The crews collected thousands of Flea Beetles, a tested and successful biological control method for leafy spurge, and returned to the surveyed sites to release the flea beetles in the most sensitive areas.

While targeting fires and invasive species, HR 2875 provides disadvantaged youth with an opportunity to help themselves by helping their communities.

Service and conservation Corps are descended from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the Depression era, and are established pathways to re-integrate vulnerable young people into society. They engage primarily young people ages 16-25 in service, training, and educational activities. The corps model places young people under the leadership of adult leaders who serve as mentors and role models.

In return for their efforts to restore and strengthen communities, corpsmembers receive: a stipend, classroom education to improve basic competencies and secure credentials, technical skills training, and supportive services. Young men and women learn to value their personal contribution, learn the importance of teamwork and experience the recognition that comes from making a positive investment in their community.

Approximately 60 percent of NASCC corpsmembers are young people of color, half enroll without a high school diploma or GED and 55 percent come from homes where the annual income is less than \$15,000. A rigorous, random assignment evaluation conducted by Abt Associates/Brandeis University reported that significant employment and earnings gains accrue to young people who join a corps and that they are significantly less likely to engage in anti-social behavior. Corps also generate a positive return on investment.

HR 2875 provides needed additional resources to meet the challenges posed by forest fires, invasive species, and other threats to our ecosystem. Enactment of this bill and the funding that it authorizes will enable us to do more.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important piece of legislation.