

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
ON
H.R. 587, THE PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2011
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS

JULY 8, 2011

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 587, a bill to amend the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993 to expand the authorization of the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce and the Interior to provide service opportunities for young Americans; help restore the nation's natural, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational and scenic resources; train a new generation of public land managers and enthusiasts; and promote the value of public service.

The Department strongly supports H.R. 587. This bill would strengthen and facilitate the use of the Public Land Corps (PLC) program, helping to fulfill Secretary Salazar's vision for promoting ways to engage young people across America to serve their community and their country. During the last Congress, the Department testified in support of similar bills in both the House and the Senate. While we appreciate the revisions to last Congress's initial version of the legislation that are reflected in H.R. 587, we would like to have the opportunity to work with the committee on the amendments described in this statement and any additional issues that we identify as we continue our review of the bill.

Engaging America's Youth Through Service

While there are other Federal programs that promote service, expanding the use of the Public Land Corps is particularly important because it also serves other high-priority goals. The Corps reconnects young people with their natural environment and cultural heritage; conserves energy and increases use of alternative sources of energy; and provides education, training, and career-building experiences which may support a pathway to careers in Federal land management agencies, which need new, younger and more diverse employees.

Secretary Salazar created the Youth in Natural Resources program during his tenure at the Colorado Department of Natural Resources as a way to educate thousands of young people about Colorado's natural resources, and he saw firsthand what a difference it made in their lives. From the day he was nominated as Secretary of the Interior, he has emphasized that one of his top priorities would be to find more ways to introduce young Americans from all backgrounds to the beauty of our national parks, refuges, and public lands and to promote an ethic of volunteerism and conservation in this Country's youngest generation. Enactment of this legislation helps pave the way to meeting one of the Secretary's top priority goals – to develop a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. Engaging youth in the great outdoors through educational and employment opportunities is one of the primary focuses of the Administration's America's Great Outdoors initiative, and is a great example of multiple federal agencies coming together for a common goal. H.R. 587 would help both the Department and our sister agencies, USDA and the Department of Commerce, offer expanded opportunities for our youth to engage in the care of America's Great Outdoors.

Background on Public Land Corps Program

The Department regards the Public Land Corps program as an important and successful example of civic engagement and conservation. Authorized by the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993, the program uses non-profit organizations such as the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and other service and conservation corps organizations affiliated with the Corps Network as the primary partners in administering the Public Land Corps program. These public/private partnership efforts help to leverage Federal dollars in some cases 3 to 1 and have assisted the Department in increasing youth employment opportunities by 45% from FY2009 to FY2010. In addition, other non-profit youth organizations such as the YMCA also participate, as do local high schools and job-training youth organizations. The youth organizations assist the National Park Service (NPS) in its efforts to attract diverse participants to the parks by recruiting youth 16-25 years of age from all socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The National Park Service makes extensive use of the Public Land Corps Act. This authority is used for the majority of all NPS youth work projects that utilize a non-profit youth-serving organization as a partner. In FY 2010, 3,006 employment opportunities¹ were created through the projects undertaken by these partner organizations. Many of these projects were for maintenance and ecological restoration purposes. The NPS receives a 25 percent cost match from the participating partner organizations. During FY

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Not less than 80 hours of pay compensation which can be in the form of a stipend or hourly wage, which must be through a cooperative agreement. Includes both projects involving work crews and individual internships.

2010, the NPS spent \$4.4 million in Service-wide fee revenue and approximately \$2 million in park-specific fee revenue, as well as approximately \$2.5 million in appropriations for the Youth Intern Program, on PLC projects.

An example of what this program has accomplished is exemplified by the work of one PLC partner organization, the Greening Youth Foundation, which recruited and trained 16 at-risk young adults from Denver. From April, 2010, through February, 2011, these 18- to 24-year olds earned green certifications that enabled them to conduct energy audits and energy retrofits at all the national park sites in Colorado and Arizona. The work provided marketable skills to its young participants and energy savings to the parks.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) also have a long history of employing young people through the Youth Conservation Corps and through the SCA and other youth service and conservation organizations for a wide array of projects related to public lands resource enhancement and facility maintenance under the Public Lands Corps Act. Though most Corps are affiliated with the nationwide Corps Network, they are often administered at the State, rather than national level. The FWS and SCA have partnered for over 20 years to offer work and learning opportunities to students. In FY 2010, 218 Conservation interns served at 90FWS sites, contributing more than 157,040 hours of work.

The BLM has engaged the services of non-profit youth service corps for many years under financial assistance agreements at the state and local level. In 2010, the BLM supported 1,689 youth employees through non-profit youth service corps organizations. They

participated in a variety of conservation service activities such as recreation and river management, historic building restoration and maintenance, seed collection, and invasive species control. BLM's Salem Oregon District, for example, hires a mixture of Northwest Youth Corps, Clackamas County, and Columbia River Youth Corps members each year to perform a variety of activities such as trail maintenance and construction.

The FWS manages 553 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System that cover over 150 million acres of land and waters, as well as 70 National Fish Hatcheries, which would directly benefit from programs authorized under H.R. 587. National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries enjoy strong relationships with the local communities, and are involved in many community-based projects that help maintain sustainable landscapes. The FWS's work is also supported by over 200 non-profit Friends organizations that assist in offering quality education programs, mentoring, and work experience for youth.

In 2010, the FWS employed 858 youth employees through local, State, and non-profit youth service corps. The FWS has provided funding for a YCC program involving the Mescalero Apache youth at the Mescalero Tribal Hatchery in New Mexico. The FWS has working relationships with numerous colleges and universities for students interested in pursuing careers in fish and wildlife management.

The Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2011

H.R. 587 would make several administrative and programmatic changes to the Public Land Corps Act. These changes would encourage broader agency use of the program,

make more varied opportunities available for young men and women, and provide more support for participants during and after their service. Appropriately, H.R. 587 would change the program's name to Public Lands *Service* Corps (PLSC), reflecting the emphasis on "service" that is the hallmark of the program. President Obama is committed to providing young people with greater opportunities and incentives to serve their community and country. Through an enhanced Public Lands Service Corps, we would be taking a critical first step that direction.

Key changes that the legislation would make to existing law include:

- Adding the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which administers national marine sanctuaries and conservation programs geared toward engaging youth in science, service and stewardship, as an agency authorized to use the program;
- Authorizing a departmental-level office at the Department of the Interior to coordinate Corps activities within the three land management bureaus;
- Requiring each of the three relevant departments to undertake or contract for a recruiting program for the Corps;
- Requiring a training program for Corps members, and identifying specific components the training must include;
- Identifying more specific types of projects that could be conducted under this authority;
- Allowing participants in other volunteer programs to participate in PLSC projects;

- Allowing agencies to make arrangements with other Federal, State, or local agencies, or private organizations, to provide temporary housing for Corps members;
- Providing explicit authority for the establishment of residential conservation centers, and encouraging those centers to be constructed using solar and other green technology with the involvement of Corps participants;;
- Authorizing agencies to recruit experienced volunteers from other programs to serve as mentors to Corps members;
- Adding “consulting intern” as a new category of service employment under the PLSC program;
- Allowing agencies to apply a cost-of-living differential in the provision of living allowances and to reimburse travel expenses;
- Allowing agencies to provide non-competitive hiring status for Corps members for two years after completing service, rather than only 120 days, if certain terms are met;
- Allowing agencies to provide job and education counseling, referrals, and other appropriate services to Corps members who have completed their service; and
- Eliminating the \$12 million authorization ceiling for the program.

We believe that the Department’s program would benefit from enactment of this legislation. As noted above, most PLC projects are designed to address maintenance and ecological restoration needs, and those types of projects would continue to be done under H.R. 587. However, this legislation specifies a broader range of potential projects,

making it likely that Corps members could become involved in such varied activities as historical and cultural research, museum curatorial work, oral history projects and programs, documentary photography, public information and orientation services that promote visitor safety, and activities that support the creation of public works of art. Participants might assist employees in the delivery of interpretive or educational programs and create interpretive products such as website content, Junior Ranger program books, printed handouts, and audiovisual programs.

PLC participants would also be able to work for a partner organization where the work might involve sales, office work, accounting, and management, so long as the work experience is directly related to the protection and management of public lands. The NPS and the FWS have a large number of partner organizations that would be potential sponsors of young people interested in the type of work they might offer.

An important change for the Department is the addition of specific authority for agencies to pay transportation expenses for non-residential Corps members. Transportation costs may be a limiting factor in program participation of economically disadvantaged young people.

Another important change is the addition of “consulting intern” as a new category of service employment under the PLSC program, expanding on the use of mostly college-student “resource assistants,” provided for under existing law. The consulting interns would be graduate students who would help agencies carry out management analysis

activities. NPS has successfully used business and public management graduate student interns to write business plans for parks for several years, and this addition would bring these interns under the program umbrella.

The Public Lands Service Corps would also offer agencies the ability to hire successful corps members non-competitively at the end of their appointment, which would provide the agency with an influx of knowledgeable and diverse employees as well as career opportunities for those interested in the agencies' mission. Refuges and hatcheries, for example, are uniquely qualified to connect with local communities since the Service has so many refuges across the country that are located near smaller communities and can directly engage urban, inner city, and rural youth. For example, partnering academic institutions are beginning to offer academic certificate programs to enhance the students' work experience and marketability for securing full-time employment in both the Federal and non-profit sectors, thereby providing orientation and exposure to a broad range of career options.

The legislation would also give the Department's other bureaus that would utilize this program the authority to expand the scope of existing corps programs to reflect modern day challenges, such as climate change and add incentives to attract new participants, especially from underrepresented and diverse populations.

An expanded Public Lands Service Corps program would provide more opportunities for thousands of young Americans to participate in public service while assisting the Department to address the critical maintenance, restoration, repair and rehabilitation

needs on our public lands and gain a better understanding of the impacts of climate change on these treasured landscapes.

Recommended Changes to H.R. 587

As noted at the start of this statement, we appreciate the changes to last Congress's initial version of the legislation that are reflected in H.R. 587. However, the Administration recommends the following amendments to this bill:

1) Hiring preference

The Administration recommends changing eligibility for former Corps participants for non-competitive hiring status from two years to one year. This change would make eligibility status consistent with other Government-wide, non-competitive appointment authorities based on service outside of the Federal government.

2) Cost sharing for nonprofit organizations contributing to expenses of resource assistants and consulting interns

Under current law in the case of resource assistants, and under H.R. 587, in the case of consulting interns, sponsoring organizations would be required to cost-share not less than 10 percent of the expenses of providing and supporting these individuals from private sources of funding. The Administration recommends giving agencies the ability to reduce the non-Federal contribution to no less than 10 percent, only if the Secretary determines it is necessary to enable a greater range of organizations, such as smaller, community-based organizations that draw from low-income and rural populations, to participate in the PLSC program. This would make the cost-share provisions for resource

assistants and consulting interns parallel to the provisions under the bill for other PLSC participants.

3) Agreements with Partners on Training and Employing Corps Members

The Administration recommends striking the provision in H.R. 587 that would allow PLSC members to receive federally funded stipends and other PLSC benefits while working directly for non-Federal third parties. The need for this language is unclear, since agencies already have flexibility in how they coordinate work with cooperating associations, educational institutes, friends groups, or similar nonprofit partnership organizations. Yet, the language could raise unanticipated concerns over accountability, liability, and conflicts of interest. For example, this language could allow an individual to receive a federally funded stipend under a PLSC agreement, and then perform work for a different non-federal group (such as a cooperating association) that is subject to agency oversight under different agreements. This language could blur the lines of responsibility that have been established in response to IG concerns over the management of cooperating associations and friends groups.

4) Living Allowance Differentials

The Administration recommends striking the provision in H.R. 587 that would allow for the Secretary to provide living allowance differentials to employees. Current law provides the Secretary with broad authority to set “living allowances” at an appropriate rate. Adding “cost-of-living” language to a law that would modify compensation for Federal employees may unnecessarily introduce confusion.

Lastly, we understand that the Department of Labor is continuing to review this legislation and may want to address how child labor protections for participating youth are ensured under this legislation. The Department of Labor will address any concerns it has directly with the Committee.

The Department is happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee have.