

**STATEMENT
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS**

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CONCERNING

H.R. 587, PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2011

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 587, the Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2011. I am Jim Pena, Deputy Associate Chief of the Forest Service.

H.R. 587 is a welcome amendment to the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993. The Nation's forests and grasslands are unique and special ecosystems that the Forest Service manages to meet the needs of present and future generations. These lands yield abundant sustainable goods and ecosystem services for the American people. The National Forest System lands, managed under a multiple-use, sustained-yield mission are perfect places for the Public Lands Service Corps participants to learn and practice an array of conservation, preservation, interpretation and cultural resource activities, and take advantage of outstanding and unique educational opportunities. In states in every region, the Forest Service has benefited greatly from the services of Conservation Corps on National Forest System lands.

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 the vision that Secretary Vilsack has for engaging young people across America to serve their community and their country. It is also consistent with the goals of the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative which includes catalyzing the establishment of a 21st century Conservation Service Corps to engage young people in public lands service work. H.R. 587 will help USDA and our sister agencies, DOI, NOAA, expand opportunities for our youth to engage in the care of America's Great Outdoors, and is a great example of multiple agencies coming together to implement a shared goal.

In recent years, the Forest Service has greatly expanded partnerships with local, state, and urban based conservation Corps programs and our Job Corps Center portfolio.

Under H.R. 587, we will be able to increase partnerships with Corps programs and expand opportunities for Job Corps graduates in the Green Careers program. In 2010, our partnerships with the Students Conservation Association, The Corps Network, and multiple youth, conservation and veterans Corps in every region resulted in nearly 5,500 youth and young adults serving on public lands. The expanded authority provided by H.R. 587 will improve the Act by providing increased flexibility to use interns and Conservation Corps teams. It will also help ensure that underserved populations are able to participate by defining minimum match requirements while also providing flexibility with the match requirement.

The emphasis on experiential training and education will help promote the value of public service in addition to contributing to the accomplishment of much needed work. H.R. 587 will expand our usage of the PLSC in a variety of program areas by providing additional resources and mechanisms to engage young people in a range of developmental opportunities. This authority will further assist in providing even more outdoor opportunities that will nurture the next generation of public land stewards.

The broader definition of natural, cultural and historic resource work under the amendment benefits the Nation's forests and grasslands by authorizing a wider variety of different types of youth engagement. The expanded authority to engage Native Americans through the Indian Youth Service Corps and resources assistants and consulting interns will contribute to our goals of creating a more diverse workforce as we seek to fill positions in an aging workforce. These new and expanded authorities will ultimately promote public understanding and appreciation of the mission and work of the federal land, coastal and ocean management agencies.

We appreciate the flexibility of the expanded authority in section 205, which would authorize the use of residential facilities. Our history of program delivery through Forest Service Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers has allowed us to reach more than six million youth since the program was established in 1964. The U.S. Forest Service operates residential Civilian Conservation Centers through an interagency agreement with the Department of Labor Job Corps program. The 2009 Omnibus appropriations Act authorized the Forest Service to operate six additional Job Corps Centers formerly run by the Bureau of Reclamation. The now 28 Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers have the capacity to house, educate and train over 6,200 enrollees between the ages of 16 and 24. Our extensive experience operating residential facilities successfully has resulted in the establishment of many best practices and in-depth operational knowledge about residential conservation centers.

The Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers not only help cultivate and develop emerging leaders within the Forest Service, but also provide a pipeline of entry-level workers. Each year the Forest Service hires dozens of Job Corps graduates that have participated in forestry and conservation programs. Through Job Corps, the Forest Service is building a skilled and diverse workforce capable of advancing the agency's mission.

With our partners, we can confidently leverage resources and expand our ability to develop a well-trained and responsible workforce in natural and cultural resources. Youth will participate in community service, restoration and stewardship projects; leadership and civic engagement programs; recreation; and team building and independent living skills training.

The Forest Service is uniquely positioned to manage residential conservation centers on the National Forests and Grasslands. This initiative could become an important component of the emerging youth outdoors initiative. It will also provide us with a unique opportunity to develop and implement innovative programming that will engage more urban youth and people that have been previously underserved.

There are a number of implementation issues that should be considered in establishing new residential conservation centers. These include the costs of operating and maintaining the facilities, potential liability issues, and questions about the impact on contract and labor laws. We would like to work with the Committee on addressing these types of issues.

H.R. 587 would increase the opportunity for Public Lands Service Corps members to leverage their education and work experience in obtaining permanent full-time employment with Federal agencies, but we offer a few amendments to the bill that are outlined below:

1) Hiring preference

The Administration recommends changing eligibility for former PLSC for noncompetitive 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, 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 Forest Service has offices already in place to help coordinate the Public Lands Service Corps through its National Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers program and the Office of Recreation, Heritage and Volunteer Resources Volunteers (RHVR) and Service program. The Forest Service RHVR Volunteers and Service program could likely be the coordinating office for Public Lands Service Corps in the Forest Service.

The Forest Service is fully committed to the advancement of young people through a variety of conservation projects, training, and service learning and conservation education. Along with the Bureau of Land Management, we can provide participants with an understanding of the agency’s history and training on multiple-use and sustained-yield management of natural, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational and scenic resources. Our mission, “*To sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations,*” can only be achieved by educating future generations and training the future public and private land managers. In turn, they will promote the value of public service and continue the conservation legacy of natural resource management for the United States.

The America's Great Outdoors initiative has generated a national dialogue on how to reconnect Americans with the outdoors. The AGO report released February 2011 includes a major emphasis on youth and career pathways. The very first goal in the report is "develop quality conservation jobs and service opportunities that protect and restore America's natural and cultural resources".

USDA Forest Service staff are a part of an interagency workgroup that is presently working to 1) catalyze the establishment of a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps that will engage young Americans in public lands and water restoration; 2) work with OPM to improve career pathways and to review barriers to jobs in natural resource conservation and historic and cultural preservation; and 3) improve federal capacity for recruiting, training and managing volunteers and volunteer programs to create a new generation of citizen stewards. The proposed amendments to the Public Lands Corps Act align well with these objectives and will undergird our efforts to fully implement the President's America's Great Outdoors priorities.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared statement. I am happy to answer any questions that you or Members of the Committee may have.