



**Testimony of Kevin Heiner, Associate Director, Southwest Conservation Corps
Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3400**

Tuesday, October 3, 2017 10:00AM

1334 Longworth House Office Building, Washington D.C. 20515

Chairman McClintock and Ranking Member Hanabusa: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before the House Natural Resource Subcommittee on Federal Lands on HR 3400. My name is Kevin Heiner and I am the Associate Director for the Southwest Conservation Corps, a program of Conservation Legacy, based in Durango, Colorado.

I am honored to be here today to represent the work that conservation corps are doing across the country to engage veterans in 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. The corps are a public private partnership of 130 cost effective corps across the Nation that are engaging young people and veterans on high priority projects on public lands that help increase access to outdoor recreation and conserve our natural resources for the enjoyment and use of current and future generations.

I am also a veteran and served in the United States Air Force from 1996 – 2000 as an Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighter. My time in the military taught me the value of teamwork, training, hard work, competence in leadership and fitness to be an effective fire fighter. The skills I gained in the military have supported my corps career in the civilian sector and also became the basis for my success and approach for directing programs in the conservation corps.

In the last 7 years conservation corps have engaged over 1,600 veterans who have helped to increase and maintain access to outdoor recreation across the country. One example, the Veterans Fire Corps program, (**V-F-C**), engages current era veterans on fire and fuels reduction work projects while providing them the training necessary to secure jobs in wildland fire. The combination of completing meaningful work and serving alongside other Veterans focused on a common goal makes this experience impactful. VFC contains the mission, structure, camaraderie and sense of purpose that is critical to helping Veterans transition from a career in the military to a successful career back at home.

Engaging in this work protecting our public lands has given many veterans a new direction. Preliminary evaluation results focused on competency development showed members in these programs had a 43% increase in job confidence and a 23% increase in sense of purpose. In a 2016, 90% of veterans surveyed indicated that these opportunities helped them transition from military to civilian life. 95% of VFC alumni indicated that they felt prepared for entry-level fire hire and 53% indicated that they have gained or are pursuing post-program employment in fire.

Unfortunately, many veterans exit the military with no clear sense of next steps or direction. However, many find a new mission and renewed purpose protecting and maintaining access to our public lands. Public land is not just a place for recreation, it is a point of national pride and this prides resonates with veterans.



Ultimately, it is the personal interactions provide the most powerful messages about the importance of this work and so I think it is important to share a tidbit of one of these stories. I want to share the story of Caleb, whose experience represents the struggles of many other vets. Caleb was a marine infantryman with many overseas tours under his belt 5 years. When he completed his military commitment, he went home to his wife but struggled with what to do on the civilian side. He tried his hand at school, but it just didn't seem to fit. He started working what was thought to be a good job, but in his mind was a "dead-end." Everything built into a deep personal crisis when he had a mental breakdown that ended with a divorce and the loss of his job. Feeling lost, he talked with a friend who had been in the VFC program and then decided to join VFC for a fresh start.

The VFC program helped him regain some of the comradery and understanding that he was used to in the military by allowing him to spend time with fellow combat veterans in a safe space. It gave him the opportunity to reestablish his life through simple things that are hard to find in the chaos of life - things like cooking outdoors and working long days in a field. Caleb found purpose in the work but more importantly, he found that, by connecting to the outdoors, he was able to refocus his mission and repurpose his life.

Conservation Corps also contribute greatly to the deferred maintenance of recreation infrastructure of public lands. For example, Corps across the nation completed 22,000 miles of trail maintenance in 2016. Corps are also incredibly cost effective. Corps are incredibly cost effective. In 2012, the National Park Service contracted with Booz Allen Hamilton to conduct an independent study comparing the cost effectiveness of conservation corps vs other options. The study revealed that, on average, using conservation corps compared to a standard National Park Service (NPS) crew saved a significant 65% and was a whopping 83% more cost effective than a contract crew.

In closing I want to reiterate four important points: Veterans Corps offer a high quality and transformative transition from military service to civilian life; the RNR Act will help to ensure more veterans are aware of opportunities to continue their service in Corps and expand the opportunities to benefit from outdoor recreation and stewardship; the 21CSC Act is a perfect companion to the RNR Act with important provisions that will expand our ability to engage veterans and get high priority projects accomplished; and Veterans Corps, and Corps generally, contribute the maintenance and expansion of recreation opportunities and support the outdoor economy through multiple ways. Thank you!