

Committee on Resources

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TESTIMONY OF ART POPE, DIRECTOR OF THE NORTHWEST YOUTH CORPS, EUGENE, OREGON

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here today to testify in support of H.R. 4838, the Healthy Forest Youth Conservation Corps Act of 2004. I want to thank Chairman Walden, from my home state of Oregon, and Rep. Tom Udall for their leadership.

I am the 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 32 states and the District of Columbia. I have attached detailed descriptions of the NYC and NASCC for the record.

Based on our work in Oregon and reports from my colleagues around the country, I am convinced that corps have an important role to play in preventing forest fires and other natural disasters that endanger our forests, providing appropriate assistance to communities threatened by fires, and helping communities recover from the devastation caused by fires.

As of July 8, five states – Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Washington – were reporting large, active fires and almost 300 large fires had been contained since January 1, 2004. In addition to these large fires, the National Interagency Fire Center reported that there had been 40,470 fires consuming 2.9 million acres since the start of the year. According to press reports, the extreme drought is expected to extend the West's fire season and drier than normal logs and trees are expected to fuel further fires as the heat wave conditions continue.

According to the National Fire News "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 fact, we are already doing this work. Legislation such as H.R. 4838 will provide the federal government with the resources necessary to continue to utilize corps and cost-effectively fight wildfires. At the same time, this bill targets disadvantaged youth and encourages them to help themselves by helping their communities. For example:

In 2003, NYC Corpsmembers built or maintained 367 miles of trail, pruned 257 acres of conifers, performed fuel reduction on 147 acres, removed noxious weeds from 1,000 acres, planted 8,230 trees, and collected seeds on 45 acres.

Between April and October, 2001 the Southwest Youth Corps in Durango, Colorado thinned or cleared 175.5 acres, created defensible space around 20 structures, removed 33 truckloads of wood, and created a series of fire breaks that extended between one and four miles and were between 40 and 400 feet wide.

In the past year the Utah Conservation Corps did thinning in a wildland 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 on 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. In the past, three camp crews were sent to fires on BLM and USFS areas (once in Wyoming and twice in 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. Summit Fire Fuels Reduction Partnership has thinned land around more that 30 homes in its local community. The Partnership also provided the local Native American Reservations with more than 400 cords of fire wood. Partnering 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 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.

The California 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.

This 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 cause Pierce's disease in grapevines and other diseases in other plants and has caused the loss of millions of dollars to wine grape growers) in Solano County. At the request of the San Joaquin County Office of Emergency Services and the state Department of Water Resources, 200 corpsmembers and staff were dispatched. The 15 crews placed heavy plastic sheeting and sandbags to protect 13.5 miles of interior levees not designed to hold flood waters. Corps headquarters or satellites sending crews included Chico, Delta, Fresno, Los Angeles, Monterey Bay, Norwalk, Placer, Pomona, Redding, San Luis Obispo, Siskiyou and Tahoe.

At the same time the CCC responded to the Delta levees, three crews were dispatched to the Gaviota Fire in Santa Barbara County. Corpsmembers from the Los Padres and Pomona centers assisted the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection with logistical support.

As crews finished up with the Gaviota Fire this month, 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 I have indicated, corps have experience working with federal, state, and local land management agencies. In 2001, 16 NASCC Corps engaged more than 1,400 corpsmembers in projects in national forests and corpsmembers provided more than 500,000 hours of service. Indeed, the Forest Service invested \$4.2 million in partnerships with Corps and leveraged an additional \$2.4 million in match.

Corps do fee-for-service work and meet the test of the marketplace everyday. If we don't meet or exceed expectations our partners go elsewhere. Enactment of H.R. 4838 and corresponding funding will enable us to do more.

Corps are the direct descendents of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the Depression era. Like the legendary CCC, today's Corps are a proven strategy for giving young men and women the chance to change their communities, themselves, and their families. By providing opportunity to young people who need a second chance, corps turn potential problems into valuable resources.

Approximately 60% of NASCC corpsmembers are young people of color, 50% enroll without a high school diploma or GED and 55% come from homes where the annual income is less than \$15,000. A rigorous, random assignment evaluation conducted by Abt Associates/Brandeis University reports positive outcomes for young people who join a corps. The Abt Associates/ Brandeis University study also found that:

- significant employment and earnings gains accrue to young people who join a corps;
- arrest rates drop by one third among all corpsmembers
- out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates drop among female corpsmembers; and
- corps generate \$1.60 in immediate benefits for every dollar invested.

Corps 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: 1) a stipend; 2) classroom education to improve basic competencies and secure credentials; 3) technical skills training; 4) supportive services; and 5) a post-service educational award. 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.

Corps are established pathways to re-integrate vulnerable young people into society. The supportive environment, the power of providing service to their own neighborhoods and the value of paid work to self-esteem combine to strengthen the ties between a young person and his or her community.

H.R. 4838 provides needed additional resources to meet the challenges posed by forest fires. Funding corps to thin forests generate community volunteers, and restore land after a fire occurs is a cost-effective way to reduce the danger of fires and their aftermath.

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