

STATEMENT OF
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FISH WILDLIFE AND PARKS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS,
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
CONCERNING

H.R. 1612, THE PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2009

APRIL 2, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 1612, a bill that would amend the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993 to expand the authorization of the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture and Commerce to provide service-learning opportunities on public lands, 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. 1612. This bill would strengthen and facilitate the use of the Public Land Corps (PLC) program, helping to fulfill the vision that Secretary Salazar has for promoting ways to engage young people across America to serve their community and their country. While we are strongly supportive of H.R. 1612, there are a few areas where we would like to suggest some changes. We will commit to

work with the committee and to provide our recommended changes to you in writing in the near future.

Engaging America's Youth Through Service

While there are other Federal programs that promote service, expanding the use of the Public Land Corps could be a particularly important part of our overall strategy for increasing opportunities and incentives for young people to become involved because this program serves other high-priority goals as well. Through it, we could reconnect young people with their natural environment and cultural heritage; make progress on energy conservation and the use of alternative sources of energy; and provide education, training, and career-building experiences--and a pathway to careers in Federal land management agencies, which are in serious need of new, younger 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 it would be one of his top priorities 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 the younger generation. Enactment of this legislation could pave the way to meeting one of the Secretary's top priority goals – to develop a 21st Century Youth Civilian Conservation Corps.

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 on 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. 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 PLC program. Projects are funded through recreational fee revenue, with the typical project receiving \$25,000 from NPS plus a 25 percent match from a partner organization. NPS spent \$4.1 million on the program in FY 2008, which funded about 1,500 young men and women working on 178 projects at 99 park units. Most PLC projects at parks are designed to address maintenance and ecological restoration needs. The NPS also conducts other youth service and conservation projects at larger parks which are funded out of the parks' own budgets.

NPS also spent more than \$3 million on the Youth Conservation Corps program which is a summer employment program for 15-18 year old youth. NPS in fiscal year 2008

employed 833 youth to work on conservation projects across the country. The YCC program has been administered by the National Park Service since 1974.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have a long history of employing youth service and conservation corps participants from the SCA, Youth Conservation Corps and other organizations for a wide array of projects related to public lands resource enhancement and facility maintenance. Though most corps are affiliated with the nationwide Corps Network, they are often administered at the state, rather than national level. For example, the FWS and SCA have partnered for over 20 years to offer work and learning opportunities to students. In FY 2007, 122 Conservation Interns served at 45 FWS sites in 24 states, contributing more than 80,000 hours of work.

The BLM has engaged the services of SCA interns for many years under a longstanding national assistance agreement, then under individual state agreements. In 2006, the last year of BLM's national agreement, a total of 116 SCA members served at 16 BLM sites in eight states. The interns 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 587 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System that cover over 150 million acres, as well as 70 National Fish Hatcheries, which would directly benefit from programs authorized under H.R. 1612. National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries enjoy strong relationships with the local communities in which they are located, 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 2007, the FWS employed 496 Youth Conservation Corps enrollees and 177 individuals through the Student Conservation Association program. Last year, over 39,000 volunteers contributed their time and talents to a variety of programs including support for youth education projects. Over the past two years 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 2009

H.R. 1612 would make several administrative and programmatic changes that, in our view, would strengthen and improve 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. 1612 would change the program's name to Public Lands *Service* Corps, 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 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which administers national marine sanctuaries, 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 a contract for a recruiting program for the Corps;
- Requiring each of the three relevant departments to establish 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 PLC 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 PLC 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 noncompetitive 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 at national parks are designed to address maintenance and ecological restoration needs, and those types of projects would continue to be done under H.R.1612. 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 park 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 PLC 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 PLC 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 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 could offer educational programs to enhance the students' work experience, 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 populations.

An expanded Public Lands Service Corps program would provide more opportunities for thousands of young Americans to participate in public service while we 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.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee have.