



# Fact Sheet

## Conservation Corps: Pairing Climate Action with Economic Opportunity

February 2021

As policymakers consider how to revive the economy after the pandemic, make our communities more resilient to the impacts of climate change, and accelerate the transition to sustainable, clean energy, many have taken a closer look at a program with a long, inspiring pedigree: conservation corps. Conservation corps are work programs that employ youths, veterans, seniors, and others in conservation, resilience, and sustainability efforts throughout the United States.

The first national conservation corps, the Civilian Conservation Corps, was launched during the Great Depression and disbanded during the Second World War. It has spawned similar programs at the federal, state, and local levels. Today, several different conservation corps offer opportunities to get Americans involved in shovel-ready projects on federal lands, providing participants with work experience, skills, and a paycheck while contributing to national climate and sustainability goals. This fact sheet will examine the history of conservation corps in America, how these corps can help address the climate crisis, how they are currently funded, and recent legislation that helps—or would help—expand their impact, including President Joe Biden’s January 27, 2021, executive order calling for a new [Civilian Climate Corps Initiative](#).<sup>1</sup>

### History of the Conservation Corps in the United States

In 1933, as a part of the New Deal—a series of initiatives to restart the economy after the Great Depression—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the first federal program of its kind. This federal relief work program employed young men in land improvement efforts such as reforestation, building trails and roads, establishing parks and wildlife sanctuaries, and controlling erosion.<sup>2</sup> In exchange for their labor, participants received a wage, meals, housing, and educational opportunities. By the time the CCC disbanded in 1942, after the United States entered World War II, the program had employed 3.4 million men.<sup>3</sup> A program for women, called She-She-She Camps, was instituted in 1936, the brainchild of the president's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. She-She-She camps hosted about 8,600 women.<sup>4</sup>

Over a decade later, in 1957, the Student Conservation Association (SCA), a nonprofit that seeks to nurture conservation leaders and inspire environmental stewardship, resurrected the CCC model to place volunteer college students in national parks and forests. The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture used the SCA model to operate the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC), which offered programming all year long, and the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), which focused on the summer. The two programs ran from the 1970s to 1981, when both were essentially eliminated from the federal budget (YACC was never revived, but YCC operates today through the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service).

While federal corps programs shrank, the 1980s saw the growth of state, local, and urban conservation corps as non-federal agencies and organizations adopted the CCC model and benefited from federal support. The *National and Community Service Act of 1990* (P.L. 101-610) provided the necessary federal support that allowed corps programs to nearly double in number to just above 100 groups.<sup>5,6</sup> The *National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993* (P.L. 103-82) further expanded federal support to community service programs and established the AmeriCorps program, which continues to support national service opportunities that address a range of national priorities, including energy and conservation projects.<sup>7</sup>

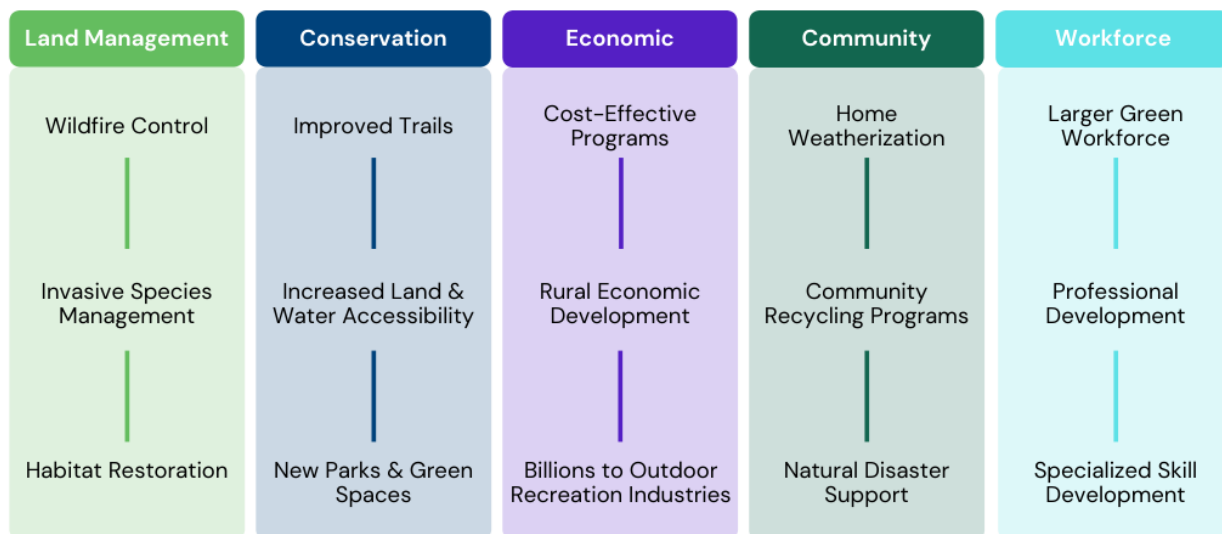
In 2010, the Obama Administration began the *America’s Great Outdoors Initiative* to create a contemporary conservation plan for the United States.<sup>8</sup> One of the greatest impacts of this initiative was the *21st Century Conservation Service Corps* (21CSC), a national initiative aiming to engage 100,000 young Americans and veterans in Corps work each year.<sup>9</sup> In support of this initiative, the *John Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act* (P.L. 116-9), which includes the *John S. McCain III 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act* (S.1403), was signed into law by President Trump in March of 2019.<sup>10,11</sup> Today, hundreds of corps continue to operate in communities across the United States, working on projects such as disaster preparedness and response, coastal restoration, trail improvement, invasive species control, infrastructure development, energy efficiency improvements, and other public service efforts.

On January 27, 2021, President Joe Biden issued a wide-ranging executive order on federal climate action, which included a provision for creating a Civilian Climate Corps Initiative. The executive order called for a strategy to create such an initiative in 90 days, within existing appropriations. The intent of this provision is "to mobilize the next generation of conservation and resilience workers and maximize the creation of accessible training opportunities and good jobs. The initiative shall aim to conserve and restore public lands and waters, bolster community resilience, increase reforestation, increase carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protect biodiversity, improve access to recreation, and address the changing climate."<sup>12</sup>

## The Environmental and Economic Benefits of Corps

### Benefits of Conservation Corps

Conservation corps employ youths, veterans, seniors, and others in conservation, resilience, and sustainability efforts throughout the United States.



Graphic By: Sydney O'Shaughnessy

Corps programs benefit the environment in numerous ways. Many corps programs focus on land management and conservation, addressing neglected public land projects as well as the \$19.38 billion in combined deferred maintenance at the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Forest Service.<sup>13</sup> Corps create and improve trails, increase public land and water accessibility, build urban and rural parks and green spaces, prevent and control wildfires, manage invasive species, and preserve wildlife habitats. Along with fostering natural ecosystem management, corps empower and support communities. Programs have weatherized homes, supported and developed community recycling projects, and responded to natural disasters.<sup>14</sup>

Corps programs strengthen the U.S. economy as well. By maintaining trails and natural environments, corps contribute to the \$887 billion-a-year outdoor recreation industry.<sup>15</sup> A study by the National Park Service found that every dollar invested in national parks returns \$10 to the economy.<sup>16</sup> Outdoor recreation opportunities increase economic activity through spending, employment, increased property values, tourism, lodging, and tax revenues. This activity is especially important for economic development in rural areas, several of which rely on outdoor recreation tourism.<sup>17</sup> Further, corps are an economically responsible choice for land maintenance and community support. A study by the Voices for National Service found that for every dollar invested in national service programs (such as AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors), \$17 is returned in social benefits to the community.<sup>18</sup> Corps programs are more cost efficient than other contracts—a study commissioned by the National Park Service found that some federal land management agencies saved 65 percent on average by using corps instead of their own crews, and 83 percent on average by using corps over contractor crews.<sup>19</sup>

Corps programs also support the U.S. economy by preparing young people for the workforce. Beyond the work experience and specialized hard skills that corps members gain while participating in programs, many corps offer interview preparation, advice on résumé building, and opportunities to gain credentials in energy auditing, green construction, hazardous material abatement, solar panel installation, wilderness firefighting, and trail construction.<sup>20,21</sup>

## Corps Funding and Support

Corps programs are supported through a variety of funding sources. For corps that serve on federally-managed lands, federal agencies such as the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Department of Transportation often use portions of their maintenance budgets to engage corps in various projects. These partnerships may occur through cooperative agreements in which costs are shared between federal agencies and corps programs. Another source of federal funding for corps is the [Corporation for National and Community Service \(CNCS\)](#), "an independent, federal grant-making government agency whose mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic participation through service and volunteering."<sup>22</sup> Through its programs AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors, this federal agency provides grants to national and local nonprofits, schools, government agencies, and faith-based and other community organizations to assist communities in recruiting, training, and placing AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors members. In 2020, CNCS announced it would provide \$576 million in AmeriCorps funding for the year, supporting more than 60,000 AmeriCorps members. The funding includes \$270 million in grants, 63 percent of which support national program models and 37 percent of which support state and local models.<sup>23</sup>

State funding for corps often comes from federal grants. For example, the Recreational Trails Program (RTP), an assistance program of the Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, provides funding to states for the purpose of developing and maintaining recreational trails and trail-related facilities. States such as Utah, Wyoming, Hawaii, and Maine have employed corps programs to complete numerous [RTP-funded projects](#).

Some states include allocations for state corps programs in their state budgets. For example, the Washington State 2019-21 budget provides \$1.3 million for the Washington Conservation Corps.<sup>24</sup> California Governor Gavin Newsom’s 2020-21 California State budget allocates \$195 million for the California Conservation Corps, the nation’s largest conservation corps.<sup>25</sup> California also supports various certified local conservation corps through grants.<sup>26</sup>

Outside of governmental funds, corps rely on individuals and corporations for donations, as well as grants through various foundations and community organizations.

## Recent Legislation Supporting Corps

### TIMELINE OF RECENT CORPS LEGISLATION



**MARCH 2019**

**The John Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act** ✓

Encourages federal agencies to increase engagement with corps by expanding the number of federal agencies that can work with the programs.

**MARCH 2020**

✓ **The CARES Act**

Includes \$339.8 billion in funding to state and local governments. Some governments, such as the state of Hawaii and city of Austin, Texas, chose to use some of that funding to create or support conservation corps programs.



**MAY 2020**

**The Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act**

Would fund 750,000 national service positions over a three-year period if passed.



**JUNE 2020**

**The CORPS Act**

A bipartisan, scaled-down version of the above Act that would increase the number of national service positions to 250,000 over three years, instead of 750,000.



**AUGUST 2020**

**Great American Outdoors Act** ✓

Addresses the maintenance backlog on federal lands and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

**21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps Act**

Would provide \$9 billion to the Department of Labor to fund qualified land and conservation corps in order to scale up their job training efforts



**SEPTEMBER 2020**

**The RENEW Conservation Corps Act**

Would create a new conservation corps run through the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture and authorize more than \$55 billion over a five-year period to put one million Americans to work to address the backlog of deferred conservation projects.



✓ = Passed into law



Graphic By: Sydney O'Shaughnessy

In addition to the January 27, 2021, executive order creating a Civilian Climate Corps Initiative, a number of recent legislative actions have also supported the expansion of corps. **The John Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (P.L. 116-9)**, signed into law in 2019, encourages federal agencies to increase engagement with corps and expands the number of federal agencies that can work with 21CSC programs by including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).<sup>27</sup> Another key provision in the law is that it establishes the Indian Youth Service Corps. This allows federal resource management agencies to enter into cooperative agreements with tribes or qualified corps for the administration of corps programs that primarily engage Native American young people.

**The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (P.L. 116-136)**, signed into law in March 2020, included \$339.8 billion in funding to state and local governments. Some governments, such as the state of Hawaii and the city of Austin, Texas, chose to use some of that funding to create or support conservation corps programs.<sup>28,29</sup>

**The Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152)**, signed into law in August 2020, could also support corps expansion efforts.<sup>30</sup> The Act has two key components: it addresses the maintenance backlog on federal lands and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The projects created by these measures could expand opportunities for federal resource management agencies to partner with corps to engage young people and veterans in conservation work.

**The Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act (S.3624)**, introduced by Senator Chris Coons (D-Del.) in May 2020, would fund 750,000 national service positions over a three-year period if passed.<sup>31</sup> According to a press release from Sen. Coons, "Under the bill, the number of AmeriCorps and national service positions could expand from 75,000 to 150,000

the first year and double to 300,000 in years two and three. The bill would also expand partnerships between AmeriCorps and federal health agencies and increase the AmeriCorps living allowance to ensure all Americans can step up to serve regardless of their financial circumstances."<sup>32</sup>

The **CORPS Act (S.3964)**, introduced by Senators Chris Coons and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) in June 2020, is a bipartisan, scaled-down version of S.3624 that would increase the number of national service position to 250,000 over three years (compared to 750,000).<sup>33</sup>

In August of 2020, Senators Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Cory Booker (D-N.J.) introduced the **21<sup>st</sup> Century Civilian Conservation Corps Act (S.4434)**, which would provide \$9 billion to the Department of Labor to fund qualified land and conservation corps in order to scale up their job training efforts.<sup>34</sup> The goal would be to restore public lands and counter the rise in unemployment due to COVID-19. The bill would also fund reforestation efforts in urban areas.

The **RENEW Conservation Corps Act (S.4538)**, introduced by Senator Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) in September 2020, would, according to a press release from the Senator's office, "create a new conservation corps run though the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture and authorize more than \$55 billion over a five-year period to put one million Americans to work to address the backlog of deferred conservation projects."<sup>35,36</sup>

## Conclusion

The original, New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps was disbanded in 1942, but it has left a strong legacy. Today, 133 corps programs are members of The Corps Network (TCN), a national association that provides accreditation and reviews programs.<sup>37</sup> Many other corps exist outside of the TCN association as well.<sup>38</sup> Corps are located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories; they are active in urban, rural, and wilderness settings; and many rely on federal support, with agencies providing partnerships and grants.

With corps programs now covering a wider variety of geographies and projects than ever, the concept has proven a winning environmental and workforce development solution 88 years after it was first launched. Federal policymakers have recognized this success story, and are seeking ways to further bolster conservation corps programs.

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This fact sheet is available electronically (with hyperlinks and endnotes) at [www.eesi.org/papers](http://www.eesi.org/papers).

*The Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) is a non-profit organization founded in 1984 by a bipartisan Congressional caucus dedicated to finding innovative environmental and energy solutions. EESI works to protect the climate and ensure a healthy, secure, and sustainable future for America through policymaker education, coalition building, and policy development in the areas of energy efficiency, renewable energy, agriculture, forestry, transportation, buildings, and urban planning.*



## ENDNOTES

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