

Dems aim to boost firefighting ranks with national service

An above normal fire season is rapidly approaching. And some lawmakers want to plus up funding for national service to train young people and veterans to fight the blazes.



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Newly minted President Franklin D. Roosevelt turned [quickly](#) to conservation after taking over in 1933.

A nearly 25 percent unemployment [rate](#) ravaged the country that year, regarded as the height of the Great Depression. And roughly 13 million Americans sat on the sidelines of a moribund economy.

Roosevelt [stood up](#) the Civilian Conservation Corps with the help of the Reforestation Relief Act. In the ensuing years, the federal government put 2 to 3 million men to work to control floods, manage forests, and turn a [desolate region](#) of North Dakota into a national attraction.

Now, amid the coronavirus pandemic, the number of jobless claims filed since early March tops [40 million](#). And some lawmakers on Capitol Hill are aiming to mimic Roosevelt's conservation pivot by deploying droves of Americans to help prevent the worst effects of wildfires and hurricanes ahead of a 2020 disaster season that is projected to be worse than average.

Sen. Ron Wyden, who represents fire-prone Oregon, introduced [legislation](#) this month to appropriate nearly \$24 billion for the Agriculture and Interior Departments over the coming years to, among other conservation projects, clear out underbrush and flammable forest materials that exacerbate fires.

The legislation requires those agencies "to the maximum extent practicable" to enlist the vestige of the CCC, a web of nonprofits that receive federal and philanthropic funding.

Mary Ellen Sprenkel, the head of The Corps Network, which represents the nonprofits, said the legislation could help to immediately send Corps workers to wildfires and other disaster zones nationwide.

"We already have thousands of Corps members in the field and can scale up relatively quickly," Sprenkel said in an interview. "A lot of our Corps members, whether they're vets or not, are chainsaw certified. A lot of our Corps members get their red card, which means they've been certified by the Forest Service to fight fires."

The Corps Network represents 130 nonprofits and roughly 25,000 members who are brought on board for specified terms, which can last from a few months to a year. As opposed to the strictly male ranks of the Depression-era CCC, the Corps now operate in urban and rural areas and pride themselves on racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

Last year, 25 of those nonprofits responded to natural disasters, including the devastating wildfires in California, according to Sprenkel. In previous years, the nonprofits responded to fires in California and East Tennessee.

"They very often get picked up by the Forest Service even before their term is over," she said. "If there is a fire raging in California, the Forest Service just picks them right up and puts them on their own crews."

On top of the Wyden bill, a number of similar proposals have surfaced in recent weeks. Rep. Marcy Kaptur, along with 13 other House Democrats, introduced [legislation](#) in April to reauthorize the CCC at \$16 billion a year.

And Sen. Chris Coons, joined by Democratic colleagues in the upper chamber and a bipartisan coalition in the House, is pushing a [bill](#) that would dramatically expand national service programs, such as the conservation nonprofits and AmeriCorps, to 750,000 participants over three years. The legislation earmarks 300,000 of those jobs for the health care sector.

According to a spokesperson for his office, Coons is aiming to team up with two senior Republicans to include the legislation in the next COVID-19 relief package. Some funding in that legislation could be used for “creating resilient landscapes ahead of the upcoming wildlife and hurricane seasons,” according to the spokesperson.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said the Senate will “probably” need to pass a new bill, following the \$2.2 trillion recovery package signed into law in March.

National-service bills have garnered bipartisan support for decades. Just last year, the two chambers of Congress rallied together to pass a sweeping [public-lands package](#) that included a provision to boost conservation-service projects. Republican Sen. John McCain [helped to lead](#) that provision in the previous Congress.

The Senate is now rallying around conservation again. A [bill](#) that would permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and tackle a national park maintenance backlog is set for Senate action in June.

But the wildfire season in the Western U.S. is rapidly approaching. Crews are [currently working](#) to put out fires in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. And above normal fire seasons are [expected](#) across many parts of the West, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

In late April, Wyden and other Senate Democrats [pressed](#) Forest Service chief Vicki Christiansen on the firefighting policies related to the coronavirus. So far, the Forest Service hasn’t responded.

“Can we make a difference this year in terms of safely working outdoors during the time of COVID-19?” Wyden asked on a conference call Wednesday with reporters. “With the right responses from the agency to the letter put together by 11 senators—I hope we’ll have it in the next week or so—we can.”

Meanwhile, federal agencies need more skilled firefighters to fill their ranks, according to Brendan Norman, the executive director of Corps member Mt. Adams Institute.

The nonprofit runs two programs: one that places veterans across the country in natural resources, public lands and environment internships and another that trains veterans to fight fires in eastern Oregon. Norman says federal funding increases will help more veterans find work in critical areas like firefighting, particularly in a time of economic distress.

“The training that they received in the military lends itself very well to a fire environment because the chains of command are very similar between the fire structure and military structure,” he told *National Journal*. “There is this ready capacity of tens of thousands of young people and veterans that are going to be able to support our infrastructure needs and our disaster preparedness and relief needs.”

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