



# America Needs a 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps

The Civilian Conservation Corps of the Great Depression Offered an Effective and Time-Tested Mechanism for Engaging Young Adults in Addressing Urgent Needs in Our Communities and on Public Lands. Embracing Such a Model Today – [While Adhering to These Principles](#) – Would Benefit America’s Young People, Economy, and Our Lands and Waters.

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*“...no country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources.”*  
– President Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 30, 1934 –

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In 1933, during the depths of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC): a job program that put 3 million young men to work on America’s lands and waters. The CCC planted billions of trees and constructed iconic trails, roads, and park infrastructure still enjoyed today. Participants in the program earned money, learned skills, and accessed education. Most importantly, they gained a sense of purpose.

Now, as our country faces historic levels of job loss, we also have urgent needs on our lands and waters including increasingly severe wildfires, flooding, and other challenges associated with climate change. We also face a multi-billion-dollar backlog of work impeding access to parks, forests, and refuges. At the same time, the ongoing pandemic has illustrated the importance of close-to-home outdoor recreation opportunities, as well as the degree to which recreation opportunities are inequitably distributed.

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Investing in public lands and waters can put people to work, address disparities in access to outdoor recreation, expand green infrastructure, and help communities develop assets that will provide lasting economic and quality-of-life benefits for decades to come. We need a 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps.

We can build a modern Corps, operated by nonprofits and state and local governments, to annually engage thousands of diverse young people, post-9/11 veterans, and Native Americans in conservation projects and job training. Through public-private partnerships, Corps and mission-adjacent organizations can complete highly professional work to support the needs of local, state, and federal government agencies.

The time is now to leverage and expand these programs. America's young people – and particularly young people of color – are experiencing disproportionately high levels of unemployment, as well as disruption to their education. They've been dealt a blow at the beginning of their adult lives and do not experience the same opportunity to thrive as many of us do. Our country cannot afford to ignore the obstacles faced by our next generation of workers. Through expanded Corps programs, we can provide the unemployed opportunities to actively participate in addressing deteriorating built and natural infrastructure, the effects of climate change, and hazardous fuel buildup. We can get work done and empower a generation with the skills and resolve we need in our future leaders.

Today's CCC-style effort should advance equity and inclusion, be based in rural and urban communities, and be responsive to local needs. By building upon our current infrastructure of Corps, NGOs, professional recreation infrastructure developers, and other community-based groups, we are confident our country will experience numerous benefits:

### **Unemployment Relief**

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in increased unemployment across all demographics, with teenagers experiencing unemployment rates above 20 percent. Corps can provide income and work experience to individuals in our hardest hit rural and urban communities. We can get work done and invest in our future with career pathway development and supporting the job-readiness skills needed to advance in any field.

### **Conservation and Restoration Work Yields High Return On Investment**

Corps work on all types of conservation, restoration and resilience and disaster response work which all yield high return on investment. For every dollar invested by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for coastal habitat restoration,

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15 jobs per million dollars spent and up to 30 jobs per million dollars spent on labor intensive restoration projects are created. And for every \$1 invested by the Forest Service in resource management investments, \$1.43 in GDP is generated and 136,450 jobs across the nation; or 19 jobs per \$1 million invested.

### Green Infrastructure Savings

Corps can advance green infrastructure projects across urban and rural communities, creating thoughtfully-designed open spaces that help manage stormwater, clean our air, and cool our communities. Many low-income communities and communities of color have long experienced under-investment in infrastructure and green spaces. Corps can help correct these inequities through creating usable, modern outdoor spaces.

### Expedited Recovery of the \$800 Billion Outdoor Economy

Our public lands and waters face billions of dollars in backlogged maintenance and improvement projects. Corps can address these needs at the federal, state, and local level. Giving Americans safe, accessible, and modern outdoor recreation infrastructure would support a quicker economic recovery for the outdoor and tourism economies, as well as invest in rural economic development by enhancing the amenities that attract businesses and workers across a range of industries.

### Improved Public Health

Ninety percent of the \$3.5 trillion America annually spends on healthcare goes to treating people with chronic and mental health conditions. In addition to the obvious benefits of physical exercise, hundreds of studies demonstrate the mental health benefits of getting outside. Corps can help improve the accessibility and usability of our recreation areas, encouraging more Americans to get outside and be active. More than ever, as concerns about the coronavirus continue, it is critical that all people have access to safe, local outdoor recreation opportunities. Corps can create additional access points for a range of activities, particularly in or near urban communities that have historically lacked access to parks, bike paths, and other outdoor infrastructure.

To help address the rise in unemployment and ensure the stability of our communities, our country needs a Corps movement similar in scale and purpose to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the New Deal Era to employ hundreds of thousands of young Americans in completing necessary project work on public lands and in communities across the country.

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As Congress works to consider a revitalized CCC, it is important that certain key principles are addressed. The CCC must:

### Advance Equity and Actively Recruit Diverse Participants

The CCC of the 1930s accomplished an enormous amount of work and helped reduce unemployment. But it did not provide equal opportunities to all Americans. A modern CCC should ensure targeted investments to recruit, train, and employ people from diverse backgrounds, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals, those experiencing economic disparities, and people from communities with inequitable access to nature. A diverse CCC is a necessary step towards eliminating barriers to equitable outdoor access and ensuring diverse and equitable representation in careers in resource and outdoor recreation management.

### Scale What's Already There

Instead of starting from scratch, build upon what already exists. There is a network of more than 230 active member organizations recognized as part of the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, which saw bipartisan support in Congress in the 2019 John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act. There is also a robust network of outdoor recreation groups, park and refuge friends groups, conservation groups, and trail organizations whose local knowledge and expertise can expand program impact and make efforts to restore public lands more successful. A re-envisioned CCC must support the entire ecosystem of organizations engaged in this work.

### Keep it Local and Responsive

National coordination is necessary, but every effort should be made to engage local non-profits and other state and local entities in the day-to-day operations and in local recruitment of participants. A re-envisioned CCC should take a decentralized approach and look to historically successful public-private partnerships and locally administered programs.

### Focus on Science-Based Projects that Enhance Ecosystem Function

Project selection is critical to program success. Projects should be science- or engineering-based with clear project objectives and, where feasible, should be guided by existing federal, state, tribal or local government plans for the conservation, restoration and resilience of nature and plans for using nature and nature-based features in disaster risk mitigation. Additionally, projects that enhance and promote equitable access and recreation must be prioritized.

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### **Promote Training and Career Path Development**

A core goal of the CCC should be rigorous training that fosters skills development and leads participants to long-term career opportunities. Nationally coordinated, standardized training should include the foundations of public lands, stewardship, and recreation; an ecological/environmental understanding of the project context; lessons on the structure of the government agencies with which Corps participants serve; instruction in technical skills (such as chainsaw operation and prescribed fire practices); as well as instruction that leads to the development of skills in leadership, communications, and teamwork. A diverse CCC is an important step towards eliminating barriers to equitable outdoor access. Inclusive and comprehensive programming can help ensure future outdoor experiences and careers are more welcoming and representative of all people.