

**Written Testimony of Kevin Heiner, Associate Director, Southwest Conservation Corps
Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3400**

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Chairman McClintock and Ranking Member Hanabusa: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before the House Natural Resource Subcommittee on Federal Lands on an important piece of legislation, HR 3400. My name is Kevin Heiner and I am the Associate Director for the Southwest Conservation Corps, a program of Conservation Legacy, based in Durango, Colorado.

I am honored to be here today to represent the work that Conservation Corps are doing across the country to engage veterans in 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. The program that I represent, Conservation Legacy, and over 130 other Corps across the Nation are engaging young adults and veterans on high priority projects on public lands that help increase access to outdoor recreation, hunting and fishing, and conserve our natural resources for the enjoyment and use of current and future generations.

I am also a veteran and served in the United States Air Force from 1996 – 2000 as an Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighter. I was stationed at Prince Sultan Air Force Base in Saudi Arabia to support the mission of enforcing the no fly zone in Iraq between the two Gulf Wars and also at Beale Air Force Base in California, where I served in a structural and wildland fire response capacity as well as in a medical and aircraft rescue response capacity to support the missions of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing and Mission Support Group. The skills I gained in the military supported my career in the civilian sector. Immediately upon finishing the active duty portion of my military commitment, I was hired by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps to serve as a crew leader in 2001 and 2002.

This on-the-ground and field-based experience continued my personal and professional commitment to national service, with added elements of youth and outdoor leadership as well as impactful conservation service projects on public lands. I was responsible for building a cohesive crew and for the crew's performance, learning and experience in the outdoors. It was life changing for me, and the group I led. Many of those individuals, including me, are still working in the corps or in other fields related to conservation and personal development. **In retrospect, I was lucky** enough to meet someone working for the California Conservation Corps while on leave in the military and it was that encounter, 15 miles into the backcountry, which made me aspire to joining a corps when my military commitment was completed. **My sense is that many veterans would like to know more about the corps through more formal connections and channels.**

After some time running my own forestry company while also attending college, in 2008 I joined the Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) as a Program Director. SCC is a program of Conservation Legacy, a national organization that cultivates local action to produce enduring widespread impact in communities, ecosystems and people. **In 2016, Conservation Legacy engaged over 1,650 young people and veterans in paid conservation work completing over 1,000,000 hours of service enhancing recreation access, protecting communities from wildfire, stewarding conservation resources and enhancing communities.** In addition to SCC, Conservation Legacy programs include the Arizona Conservation Corps, Southeast Conservation Corps (TN), Bridge Network (national, based in WV), Environmental Stewards (national) and Preservation Youth Summit (national). The organization was founded in Colorado in 1998 and operates in 45+ states across the country.

In 2009, I was fortunate to be heavily involved in the development of the Veterans Fire Corps (VFC) program at SCC and I've been directly involved since. The VFC is a collaborative initiative of Conservation Legacy and other Conservation Corps run in partnership with state and federal agencies including the USDA Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and AmeriCorps – the non-military national service option. VFC aims to engage recent era Veterans on priority hazardous fuels projects while developing the next generation of wildland firefighters.

The SCC launched the original VFC pilot program with the San Juan National Forest in southwestern Colorado. SCC worked with the District Fire Management Officer, Shawna Legarza, to develop the program. **Ms. Legarza, who is now the National Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the USFS, worked closely with SCC to define the VFC as a combination of certification training, on the job experience and direct agency personnel mentorship to support the development of the technical, teamwork and leaderships skills required to become an agency fire fighter.**

We are appreciative of the provisions in HR 3400, the Recreation Not Red-Tape Act, that would encourage information be provided on Corps opportunities to veterans and servicemembers, expand volunteer and outdoor engagement, and opportunities for veterans and the public to recreate in new areas. We see significant potential to expand Corps' engagement with veterans through enhanced partnerships with other Department of Interior agencies, and additional focus on recruiting with Department of Veterans Affairs, DOD and the Department of Labor.

We also support the focus in the RNR Act on hiring veterans in land management positions. In addition to their veterans hiring preference, they can earn non-competitive hiring eligibility for two years from service in a Corps as well. Veterans Corps programs can offer an important bridge to civilian life and job skills, but also a way for veterans and their families to engage more with the outdoors, recreation, and America's public lands.

That is why in addition to the importance of the RNR Act provisions around veterans, we hope the committee will give additional attention to expanding the opportunity for veterans to serve in Corps, gain in-demand skills, and address high-priority projects, like would be accomplished through the bipartisan 21ST Century Conservation Service Corps Act – HR 2987 – introduced by Rep. Martha McCally (R-AZ) a veteran herself. We also thank Rep. Scott Tipton (R-CO) of this committee who is an original co-sponsor.

Veterans Fire Corps successfully addresses two needs: 1) veterans who need a way to transition from military to civilian life and service; and, 2) land management agencies who need highly qualified and well trained employees and key wildfire remediation projects accomplished. VFC builds upon the knowledge, leadership experience, and training of the women and men who served in the armed forces, refocusing their mission to protecting our public lands from the threat of wildfire.

Conservation Legacy co-founded the and has worked to replicate the program to other Conservation Corps programs including the California Conservation Corps, Montana Conservation Corps, Nevada Conservation Corps, Student Conservation Association, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, and Western Colorado Conservation Corps.

Conservation Corps programs nationwide have engaged over 1,600 veterans total since 2009, through 19 separate Corps programs around the country. Since 2011, the California Conservation Corps, Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association have **engaged over 1,000 Veterans in the Veterans Fire Corps.**

The Veteran Fire Corps Program Model:

Veterans Fire Corps targets recent era Veterans, generally between the ages of 23- 35. Veterans joining the program receive a living stipend, training, and support while working on projects varying in length from 12-weeks to six months. Training covers the key firefighting areas leading towards a Firefighter Type 2 certification. VFC crews are then mobilized on thinning projects, pile burning, prescribed burns, and, at times, initial fire attack. The federal agencies engage the VFC crews to complete hazardous fuels reduction projects as well as assist with prescribed burn assignments, direct fire response and disaster response.

Most applicants applying to the program are searching for a way to transition from the military to civilian world. “Vets speak a common language,” said a former Army interrogator and past participant. He also addressed a more serious issue shared by his crew members. “Most combat vets have problems,” he said bluntly, “and being with other vets helps.” It is this connection that kept one former Marine Corps sniper in the program; he realized that his anxiety around post- traumatic stress seemed to fade the longer he spent living with his fellow veterans among trees and streams.

The VFC model is a particularly good fit for veterans transitioning to civilian life due to the similarities between Corps, the wildland fire and the military systems and culture:

- Both have a clear structure with line of command;
- Both rely on teamwork and comradery;
- Both are focused on a greater mission and service to country;
- Both teach skills and have clear credentialing;
- Both have clearly articulated career paths; and,
- Both involve hard physical work that provides personal and group challenge.

In many ways VFC provides veterans a short-term opportunity to test out their interest in wildland fire without having to make a long term commitment. We typically find that veterans quickly learn whether wildland fire is for them and whether they want to pursue it as a career. Those who enjoy the work are often passionate about careers in wildland fire; others quickly figure out that they need a different type of career.

An ultimate goal of the VFC is to transition its graduates into employment as wildland firefighters, but VFC also encourage outdoor stewardship and enable veterans to gain the benefits of being outdoors for physical and mental health. Because many of the VFC crews work alongside agency fire crews, they often are able to network and learn about opportunities locally and make connections with hiring managers long before any job openings are available. More than half of all graduates have found employment in wildland fire; many of the others self- select that fire management is no longer a career goal for them. Program graduates obtained positions such USFS hot shots, USFS engine crew, BLM hand crew, and BLM forestry technicians.

Fire agencies see VFC as a filter or, as one land manager called it, “the minor league hotshots” where they can work with veterans and hire the program alumni who best meet agency requirements. This

helps save the federal government money in HR and training costs as well, all while accomplishing necessary projects.

We've been engaged with studying the effectiveness and return-on-investment from Veterans Fire Corps programs and found the following outcomes:

- **47% increase in job confidence**
- **23% increase in sense of purpose**
- **53% of Veteran Fire Corps members surveyed in 2016 indicated they have gained or are pursuing related post-program employment**
- **90% of Veterans Fire Corps members surveyed in 2016 indicated that VFC assisted them in adjusting from military to civilian life**
- **95% of Veterans Fire Corps members surveyed in 2016 indicated that the VFC prepared them for entry-level employment in wildland fire**
- **47% increase in Preliminary results from evaluation of veteran participants in Conservation Corps programs**

Veterans participating in the program receive significant certification training including:

- S-212, Wildland Fire Chain Saws
- S-130/190, Basic Firefighter (red card)
- CPR/First Aid
- Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response Standard (HAZWOPER)
- ICS 100, Introduction to Incident Command System
- ICS 200, Incident Command System for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents
- ICS 700, National Incident Management System
- Emergency Camp Support
- S110, Basic Wildland Fire Orientation
- Job application training

Project Accomplishments: The projects VFC crews complete are critical to forest and community health across the country. Wildfires continue to burn hotter, faster and more frequently. Fuels reduction, fire mitigation and prescribed burn assignments that VFC crews are tasked with are critical to insuring that, if a wildfire does burn, effects are mitigated. Project work is varied but primarily focused on forest fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, prescribed burn preparation and invasive species removal. The forest fuels reduction is the majority of the project work and is focused on treating high-density areas with heavy fuel loads.

Veteran fire crews have reduced fire fuel loads that included Piñon, Juniper, Ponderosa, and Oak on public lands through Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. Invasive species projects were primarily focused on the removal of Tamarisk and Russian Olive.

VFC crews in Arizona and Colorado in 2015 reduced hazardous fuels on nearly 4,400 acres of public land in the Wildland Urban Interface. In 2016, VFC contributed another 22,146 work hours completing 38 miles of firebreaks and improving 526 acres in Arizona and Colorado. Each year the projects are different. On some years, crews get the chance to complete prescribed burns which result in greater treated acreage numbers. On other years, due to uncooperative weather or troubles securing smoke permits, the crews are not allowed to burn leaving only the acres they have thinned by hand as accomplishments.

VFC impacts the Veterans engaged with VFC as well as communities where VFC crews operate. VFC helps Veterans transition from military service to equally meaningful civilian service in a structured, safe and impactful way. The transition is facilitated by completing critical work in local communities which is protecting people, property and resources from the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

The impact of the program can be seen in the stories of veterans who have been impacted through VFC participation:

Arizona & Southwest Conservation Corps-Zach Dancy

Zach worked for the Army National Guard as a medic and previously as a civilian nurse practitioner. He was active military until spring 2015 when he joined the VFC Program with the Arizona Conservation Corps in Tucson. There he came to really enjoy the work, as well as the people he got to work with. Every day he felt excited to go out into the field and help others progress and succeed in the VFC program. Though fighting fire has become a lingering interest for Zach, for now he wants to stay involved in VFC programs as a leader and mentor for the foreseeable future. In 2016, Zach was promoted from VFC member to Crew Leader with the Southwest Conservation Corps to help other veterans' transition to civilian life through the VFC.

Arizona Conservation Corps-Ben Florey

Ben Florey was born and raised in Michigan. He enlisted in the Marine Corps as a Rifleman and was based out of Camp Pendleton from 2008 to 2014. Ben served as an Infantry Squad Leader and served two tours in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Ben separated honorably from the Marines in 2014 having attained the rank of Sergeant. That same year he moved to Yuma, Arizona with his wife who was pursuing a career in primary education.

Ben was working at a Home Depot in Yuma helping to support his family when he decided to take a chance and pursue a career in Wildland Fire. In January of 2016, Ben joined the Veteran Fire Corps, serving with Arizona Conservation Corps in Tucson. Ben received basic training in first aid, wildfire suppression and chainsaw operation. He spent ten weeks working in and around the communities of Yarnell, Prescott Valley, Yuma, and Safford aiding in fuel mitigation projects designed to help protect BLM Resources and Wildland Urban Interface Communities from the threat of fire. During his term of service he met BLM staff in Yuma looking to hire seasonal wildland fire fighters. Two months into Ben's term of service he was offered a position on a light engine with BLM on the Colorado River District. Ben is currently serving as a GS-4 Seasonal Range Technician (Fire) with the BLM fighting fire at home and across the western United States. He intends to continue pursuing a career in fire and land management.

Southwest Conservation Corps-Caleb Courtney

Caleb served five years in the Marine Corps. When he finished with the military he struggled with the civilian side of life. Everything built up to an early mid-life crisis when he had a mental breakdown that ended with a divorce and a lot of questions on his part about what was next in life.

Caleb discovered that the VFC program was what he needed to not only be successful in the firefighting world, but to give him a transition back into civilian life. The VFC helped him retain some of the camaraderie and understanding that he had in the military by allowing him to spend time with fellow combat veterans, but also gave him the opportunity to reestablish his life through simple things like cooking outdoors and working long days in a field he enjoyed.

The program gave him the experience and technical skills he needed to pursue a career in firefighting. Caleb left with great friendships and a more solid direction in life; he highly recommends the VFC program to any combat veteran that is interested in a similar career. He is currently looking towards several hotshot crews and thinking about stepping into a VFC leadership role.

While Veterans Fire Corps have a major impact on veterans and the communities they serve, other veterans Corps, and Conservation Corps generally also have an important impact nationally, and help to address priority resource management needs, all while developing the next generation of outdoor stewards, recreationists, business entrepreneurs, and sportsmen and women.

Conservation Corps are a major labor source and contribute greatly to reducing backlog maintenance, increasing access, and enhancing fish and wildlife habitat and recreation infrastructure on public lands. For example, in 2016 Corps around the country: **improved and made accessible 1.6 million acres of wildlife habitat; planted 1.5 million trees; removed 365,000 acres of invasive species; reduced 32,000 acres of fire fuel; constructed and improved 22,000 miles of multi-use trails; improved 16,000 recreation facilities; completed 8,200 acres of erosion, landslide, and flood prevention; restored 2,600 miles of fish and waterway habitat; responded to 500 wildfires and disasters; and preserved 190 historic structures.**

Corps are also incredibly cost effective. In 2012, the National Park Service commissioned a study by Booz-Allen-Hamilton which revealed that, “on average, using Conservation Corps instead of NPS crews saved 65%...[and] that the savings using Conservation Corps instead of contractor crews were even more significant with average savings of 83%! Project sponsors consistently express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of work and productivity of Corps. **Virtually all federal project partners (99.6%) say they would work with Corps again.**

We see great opportunity for our Veterans Corps, and Corps generally through this new legislation. The RNR Act will establish the importance of recreation on public lands, generate more funding for land management maintenance through online pass sales and make public lands recreation more accessible. It will also help accomplish more projects through volunteer engagement – which are often projects and efforts our Corps help the land management agencies organize and lead.

The maintenance aspect of our public lands is critical for recreation. With high levels of visitation, hardworking Americans expect access to well-maintained and quality places to recreate, and hunt and fish, particularly in public places their tax dollars are used to support. Increased use of public lands also means more maintenance needs, but also that the outdoor economy is growing significantly. Many states and rural communities are looking to increased tourism, recreation, and sport as economic drivers.

The projects Corps, and our Veterans Corps, complete benefit Americans who we know want more accessible and well-maintained public lands, healthy waters, and fish and wildlife habitat that is productive. This particularly includes America’s recreationists and hunters and anglers who rely on access and a healthy environment. Not only is that great for our communities but it also provides great job and entrepreneurial opportunities for our young adult and veteran Corpsmembers in the outdoor economy. Many Corpsmembers go on to work in the outdoor economy, or to start their own businesses in the sectors they’ve learned about through their term of service in a Corps.

We've also done a study on Corpsmember attitudes on recreation and economic impact after they leave the Corps and found that participants intended **on engaging in 2 1/2 times more outdoor recreational activities** than members of the comparison group. **Corpsmembers reported that they intended to spend 123% (or 2 1/4 times) more on outdoor recreational gear and apparel than members of the comparison group.** Corps are both helping enhance recreation assets and access, but also making significant purchases, and developing the next generation of recreationists and resource stewards.

The Recreation Not Red-Tape Act, combined with our 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act would be important tools for engaging more veterans in these high-quality transition and skills-building based Veterans Corps and in accomplishing more priority projects like wildfire remediation, and recreation infrastructure expansion and maintenance. Both these bills would also help our 135 other Corps around the country engage more young adults and boost the capacity and capabilities of our land management partners to get more work done, and thereby enhance access to and the quality of recreation opportunities in existence now, and planned for expansion through this legislation.

In closing I want to reiterate four important points: Veterans Corps offer a high quality and transformative transition from military service to civilian life; the RNR Act will help to ensure more veterans are aware of opportunities to continue their service in Corps and expand the opportunities to benefit from outdoor recreation and stewardship; the 21CSC Act is a perfect companion to the RNR Act with important provisions that will expand our ability to engage veterans and get high priority projects accomplished; and Veterans Corps, and Corps generally, contribute the maintenance and expansion of recreation opportunities and support the outdoor economy through multiple ways.

Our network of 135 Corps form around the country are excited by the potential of the RNR Act to contribute to all these aspects of recreation, public lands, and veterans I have discussed. We look forward to helping with passage of this legislation and the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.

About the 21CSC Act

The bipartisan 21CSC Act was introduced in the United States Senate (S.1403) and House of Representatives (H.R.2987) in June 2017. The bill was introduced in the Senate by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO), Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM). It was introduced in the House by Rep. Martha McSally (R-AZ), Rep. Seth Moulton (DMA), Rep. Scott Tipton (R-CO), and Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ). The 21CSC Act represents a bipartisan effort for the advancement of Corps as a public-private strategy to meet the needs of America's resource management agencies and provide work opportunities for young adults and veterans.

The 21CSC Act would allow federal land and water management agencies – like the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service – to create formal, more flexible partnerships with 21CSC member organizations. It would also enable additional federal agencies to more easily partner with 21CSC organizations to accomplish their goals.

Specifically, the 21CSC Act would:

- Expand the number of federal agencies that can work with 21CSC programs. Enlisting Conservation Corps to do priority work has often proven to be more cost-effective for federal agencies.

- Encourage federal agencies to collaborate, and require that they use only existing resources to work with 21CSC programs, meaning there would be no additional cost to tax-payers.
- Establishes new coordinators at participating agencies to ensure the efficient functioning of the 21CSC.
- Prioritize the engagement of recent veterans, native, and disadvantaged youth in 21CSC programs, and establishes a new Indian Youth Corps program.
- Establish standards for data collection and measuring the effectiveness of 21CSC programs.
- Provide two years of non-competitive hiring eligibility with federal agencies for young people and veterans who gain valuable skills through service in 21CSC programs.
- Provide new Internship and Resource Assistant opportunities for Corpsmembers, along with direct hiring authority.