



Co-Chair Lew Frederick
 Co-Chair Susan McLain
 Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Education
 900 Court St. NE
 Salem, OR 97301

RE: HB 5025 – Support for funding Oregon Conservation Corps

Dear Co-Chair Frederick and Co-Chair McLain,

We are pleased to provide testimony on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission’s (HECC) budget, specifically on The Office of Workforce Investment (OWI) within the HECC. The OWI provides critical links for our state’s young people to get the training and experience needed to enter the workforce. We are writing to urgently request this Committee restore funding to one of OWI’s innovative programs – the Oregon Conservation Corps, as requested in the HECC 2023-2025 Agency Budget Request Policy Option Package 301. This program has been heralded by Governors Brown and Kotek, but was unfortunately left out of the Recommended budget, which was released amidst an uncertain economic forecast.

The Oregon Conservation Corps (OCC) was established under the comprehensive wildfire package, SB 762 (2021) with the dual purpose of investing in wildfire resiliency and youth workforce development initiatives in at-risk communities across Oregon. This innovative initiative has been achieving meaningful wildfire protection while training the next generation of wildfire workforce, reaching youth and communities that have traditionally been underserved and/or left behind.

“The Oregon Conservation Corps has given Fire District 3 the flexibility to help our most under-resourced neighbors without the restrictions or delays associated with other funding streams.”

Ian Kassab – Community Risk Coordinator Jackson County Fire District 3

Since SB 762 was passed, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission organized an Advisory Committee, built a grant process, and has managed a dozen awards to Oregon’s leading youth development organizations including Northwest Youth Corps, Heart of Oregon Corps,

Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Ecostudies Institute, Lomakatsi Restoration Project, Ant Farm, Integral Youth Services, Phoenix School of Roseburg, and Community Service Consortium. These organizations partner with the Office of the State Fire Marshall, local fire chiefs, and Oregon Department of Forestry to ensure the highest priority sites are selected. These targeted small acreage projects often provide the “missing link” to fire agencies’ ability to address the highest priority risks within their jurisdiction. And it is working.

"My session as a Community Wildfire Protection Corps member at Northwest Youth Corps opened up a new world of possibilities for me. I had no prior experience on work crews, using chainsaws, or with wildfire preparedness. In just three months I gained the knowledge and confidence needed to move into countless job opportunities in conservation, wildfire management, and outdoor leadership. Additionally, my experiences as a crew member has taught me how to approach complex projects with a team, collaborate implementing a work plan, and be adaptable to many different variables."

- Alicia Rabideau – OCC Alumni 2022

The \$10 million investment the Legislature made to the OCC in 2021 has garnered attention from across the West, including from philanthropists and foundations ready to follow the state’s continued leadership. The OCC has made significant progress on building the workforce needed to help protect Oregon communities that face ever increasing wildfire risk. Without continued support from the state, the public/private partnerships that drive these outcomes will be put at risk.

We strongly urge this committee to support the HECC Office of Workforce Investments Policy Option Package 301 request which includes \$10 million for the Oregon Conservation Corps and \$2 million dedicated to Tribal Youth Corps funding. With this investment, Oregon will continue to lead the West in innovative solutions that build resiliency in our highest-risk communities and in developing the workforce of the future.

Signed by:

Northwest Youth Corps
Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council
Heart of Oregon Corps
Ecostudies Institute
Integral Youth Services
Ant Farm
Oregon Wild
OCC of Umpqua Valley
Phoenix School of Roseburg
Lomakatsi Restoration Project
Association of Oregon Counties
League of Oregon Cities
Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology