



April 17th, 2023

Co-Chair Lew Frederick
Co-Chair Susan McClain
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,

I am 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.

I am 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.

Attached to this letter is a testimonial from a landowner, whose home is now protected from wildfire due to this program (provided anonymously, by request of the landowner).

The young adults who engaged in hands-on and classroom-based wildfire training while enrolled in Oregon Conservation Corps are now about to graduate their training program. All have earned certifications and hundreds of hours of hands-on experience. They earned their Driver's License, wrote their first resume, and made detailed career plans with program staff. At the end of their "guard school" training for Red Card fire certification, corpsmembers got to register and interview with US Forest Service, ODF, and private fire fighting agencies, and several will transition directly into wildland fire fighting and local arborist jobs this summer.

In Central Oregon, and across the state, we have a new groups of 16-24 year-olds ready and waiting to enroll this summer, fall, and winter, to build on the initial successes of this innovative program. But your action is needed.

I 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.

Sincerely,

Laura M Handy, Executive Director, Heart of Oregon Corps

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To Whom It May Concern:

It's hard to find the right words which express the depth of the gratitude I feel after receiving the Central Oregon Wildfire Workforce Partnership Forest Fuels Reduction Grant (COWWP). If there is one summary sentence it would be I feel confident that I can shelter in place on my property and survive a wildfire.

I never imagined I would receive such a gift. I used to look out on my property with dread because of the extreme fire danger. Now I smile and chuckle because it is so safe.

I'll tell you a little about myself to help you further understand the magnitude of the gift. I am in my sixties, legally blind, live a simple life, and am very active. I get around using either a guide dog, white cane, or rides from neighbors. I live in Central Oregon, on a forty acre parcel, ten miles from town.

Since 2015 I have experienced five fires in my neighborhood. Two of which burned my property. I've been evacuated twice. In the year 2020 I had fifteen minutes notice to prepare for evacuation. I was evacuated for nine days. During that time I was made aware of the fact that they may not be able to save my home. My property was the last to burn in the 6000 acre fire. On one side of the road everything burned. While on the other side they were able to save all four houses. A spot fire came within thirty feet of my house.

So I'm very aware of the real danger of living in an extreme fire zone. I'm also aware of the added risk of either walking out or relying on others to help me evacuate because I do not drive. So you can see how being able to shelter in place is a huge gift that feels like ultimately it could save my life. So thank you again.

There were other gifts I received that were unanticipated. A little more about myself to help you understand these secondary gifts. I worked as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker prior to my vision changing. I had the opportunity to work with youth in a variety of settings and agencies. It was a pleasure to be a part of the COWWP fuel reduction team which included The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), Central Oregon Interagency Council (COIC), and the Heart of Oregon Corps. This collaborative project was one of the most powerful projects I have ever witnessed. They teach students how to work, how to get along with others, while teaching them skills. They meet each student right where they are at.

I have had multiple positive opportunities to know the ODF personnel. They have fought fires on my property, coordinated my evacuation, and provided consultation on multiple occasions regarding fuel reduction. It was a treat to see them train future fire fighters on my property as a part of the grant. The lead ODF representative Cassie was so patient and skilled. She has a gift for teaching. I learned a lot about fuel reduction principles by listening and watching them train others. The students had such respect for the ODF, COIC, and Heart of Oregon staff.

The last gift of all was the positive experience I had with Lauren Street the COWWP Project Planner. I didn't realize what a complex project it would be. Each step of the project Lauren demonstrated knowledge, experience, and patience. She turned what could have been a very stressful situation into one filled with so many positive and happy memories. Thank you to every one for this grant and changing my life.

