

Submitter: Natalie Whitson

On Behalf Of: Northwest Youth Corps

Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Education

Measure: HB5025

Co-Chair Frederick

Co-Chair McLain

Members of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education

Dear Co-Chair Frederick, Co-Chair McLain, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to write in support of the Oregon Conservation Corps. As the devastating Labor Day fires burned outside Springfield in 2020, I know I was not the only Lane County resident with a “go” bag in the middle of my living room floor, in anticipation of receiving notice that the fires had reached Eugene and that I would need to evacuate my home.

Although it is currently raining right now, it is only time before Lane County - and indeed the state - will be amid another hot, dry summer. The only reason I have right now to hope that more Oregon towns will not burn up later this fall is due to the vital work being currently done by through the Oregon Conservation Corps.

As you undoubtedly know, this program has the dual purpose of reducing wildfire risk in our most vulnerable communities while training a cohort of young adults who can fill the needed gaps in our wildfire workforce of tomorrow. In a little more than 12 months, this innovative public/private partnership has trained 279 young adults, provided 36,000 hours of on-the-groundwork, while protecting hundreds of structures and thousands of acres.

This highly popular program was only funded for a single biennium in the 2021 Legislative session. I hope you will consider joining Fire Marshalls from across the state, the Association of Oregon Counties, and the League of Cities in strongly urging the Ways and Means Committee to support the Higher Education Coordinating Commission Office of Workforce Investments Policy Option Package 301 request. This includes \$10 million for the Oregon Conservation Corps and \$2 million dedicated to Tribal Youth Corps funding.

Importantly, this package strategically focuses investments where they are most needed – protecting communities state-wide from wildfire risk – as well as giving us an opportunity to connect underserved Oregonians with wildfire related career-readiness, skills training, and work experience to prepare them for meaningful secure work. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Natalie Whitson