



COIC



Co-Chair Janeen Sollman

Co-Chair Ricki Ruiz

Joint Committee on Ways and Means – Subcommittee on Education

900 Court St. NE

Salem, OR 97301

RE: SB 5525 – Support for funding Oregon Conservation Corps

Dear Co-Chair Sollman and Co-Chair Ruiz,

We are pleased to provide testimony on SB 5525 and ask that the Committee fully fund the Higher Education Coordinating Commission and provide \$10 million in base funding for the continued operation of the Oregon Conservation Corps program with \$5 million to match non-state funds dollar-for-dollar. Originally established in 2021, the Oregon Conservation Corps serves the dual purpose of investing in wildfire resiliency and youth workforce development initiatives in at-risk communities across Oregon. This innovative initiative has achieved meaningful wildfire protection while training the next generation of wildfire workforce, reaching youth and communities that have traditionally be underserved and/or left behind.

The Oregon Conversation Corps has a high return on investment as this work reduces the risk of catastrophic, expensive destruction in communities and develops in-state workforce capacity with knowledge of local terrain and fire conditions. An investment in the Oregon Conservation Corps through the HECC budget is cost-effective and will sustain this essential program with unique value and benefit to Oregon communities.

*“These efforts towards fire prevention give us a fighting change to protect structures and prevent injuries during extensive wildfire events. Jefferson County is an economically challenge area, and this program allows us to treat properties and work with homeowners that simply wouldn’t otherwise be able to do this.”*

Chief Jeff Blake – Jefferson County Fire and EMS

HECC’s role as the Oregon Conservation Corps administrator and program manager is a critical part of our overall success. Since SB 762 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, Lomokatsi 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 have 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. Since its inception in January 2022, the program has treated a total of 7,406 acres across 1,147 sites, protecting 1,347 structures. Without continued support from the state, the public/private partnerships that drive these outcomes will be put at risk.

Signed by:

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