

Federal Conservation Corps Programs: Options for Congress in Response to COVID-19

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Due to the effects of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, unemployment across the United States has risen to levels unseen since the Great Depression. In response, some stakeholders, including some Members of Congress, have looked to the job relief programs established as part of the New Deal as a potential policy solution for addressing the needs of unemployed Americans. In particular, some have turned their attention to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal program operating from 1933 to 1943 that put 3 million unemployed young men to work on projects aimed at the “conservation and development of the natural resources of the United States.”

Although the CCC dissolved more than 70 years ago, the program influenced current federal programs, such as the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and the Public Lands Corps (PLC)—the two primary federal conservation corps programs. *Conservation corps* typically refers to organizations or programs that engage young adults, veterans, and other groups in service projects that address outdoor recreation, natural resource conservation, disaster response, and community needs, among other focus areas.

As Congress considers conservation corps programs as a possible means to address unemployment caused by the COVID-19 crisis, it may be helpful to understand how the YCC, PLC, and other corps programs differ from the original CCC model. For example, whereas the CCC was a sweeping, federally managed and administered job relief program, the YCC and the PLC are comparatively smaller in scale and operate primarily through cooperative agreements between federal agencies and locally based, nonfederal partner organizations. Today, nonfederal partners (sometimes referred to as *sponsoring organizations*) are primarily responsible for the recruitment, hiring, and administration of participants—known as *corpsmembers*. In addition, federal funding differs substantially across these programs. Congress appropriated upward of \$350 million annually for the CCC during the program’s peak in the 1930s, the equivalent of roughly \$5.9 billion in 2020 dollars. By contrast, Congress has authorized \$60 million and \$12 million per year for the YCC and the PLC, respectively. The YCC and PLC programs typically do not receive appropriations under a dedicated spending account; they are funded through various federal and nonfederal sources.

A wide variety of options is available to Congress, should it consider expanding federal conservation corps programs in response to the ongoing economic crisis caused by COVID-19. These options include changes to existing conservation corps authorities, such as the YCC and PLC programs. Such changes might include expanding the number of federal agencies authorized to enter into cooperative agreements with corps partner organizations, providing additional flexibility for agencies to offer noncompetitive hiring status to eligible corpsmembers, and using existing corps-related authorities to establish new corps programs (e.g., aimed at specific communities or demographics). Congress also might consider options unrelated to the YCC and PLC authorities such as changes to broader federal corps programs with conservation-related components (e.g., the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers and the National Civilian Community Corps), as well as possible options to create new federal conservation corps programs, such as a reimagining or reestablishing the CCC.

The degree to which any of these options would result in additional conservation-corps job opportunities or address unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is unclear. Given the wide range of potential options available to Congress, the scale, scope, and fiscal impact of any particular corps program would depend largely on the selected approach. In addition, it may be difficult for Congress to adopt any long- or short-term legislative proposals that address issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic due to the ongoing uncertainty associated with the pandemic.

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Introduction

In light of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic's severe impact on the U.S. labor force, some Members of Congress and other stakeholders have expressed interest in job creation and training programs that may provide work relief to unemployed Americans.¹ In particular, some stakeholders have turned their attention to existing and proposed programs modeled, in part, after the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).²

The CCC was a federal work relief program operating from 1933 to 1943 that put 3 million unemployed young men to work on projects aimed at the "conservation and development of the natural resources of the United States."³ Although the CCC program ended more than 70 years ago, the program has inspired other federal programs, such as the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and the Public Lands Corps (PLC). These two programs are the primary federal job corps initiatives whose missions, similar to the CCC, include enhancing and maintaining America's federal and nonfederal lands and waterways. However, both the YCC and the PLC differ from the original CCC model in key ways. For example, whereas the CCC was a sweeping, federally managed and administered job relief program, the YCC and the PLC are comparatively smaller in scale and operate primarily through cooperative agreements between federal agencies and locally based corps organizations.

To the extent that Congress may consider whether or how to broaden the scope of federal conservation corps programs in response to the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the differences between the current YCC and PLC models and the predecessor CCC model may be helpful. Members have introduced a number of bills both prior to and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that would address federal conservation corps programs in various ways. For example, proposals to provide supplemental appropriations to federal agencies have included provisions that direct authorized agencies to utilize existing corps authorities "to the maximum extent possible."⁴ Other proposals would provide additional funding directly to corps programs, and still others propose establishing new federal service or jobs corps programs.⁵ For the purposes of this report, *federal conservation corps programs* refers to federal service and job programs authorized specifically for the restoration, conservation, and preservation of federal lands and waterways.⁶

¹ For example, see Office of Rep. Josh Harder, "Coronavirus Service Corps: A Plan to Mobilize and Empower American Youth during the Coronavirus Pandemic," August 31, 2020 at <https://harder.house.gov/sites/harder.house.gov/files/Coronavirus%20Service%20Corps.pdf>.

² For example, see Collin O'Mara, "7.7 Million Young People Are Unemployed. We Need a New 'Tree Army,'" *New York Times*, May 18, 2020; and Jacqueline Alemany and Brent D. Griffiths, "Young People Are Being Left Out of Coronavirus Economic Relief Efforts. That Could Be a Big Problem," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2020.

³ Act of June 28, 1937, ch. 383, §1, 50 Stat. 319.

⁴ S. 3684 §2(c)(1).

⁵ For example, see S. 3624, H.R. 2358, H.R. 4629, §204, and S. 2452, §204. For a more detailed discussion of legislative proposals related to federal conservation corps programs, see "Options for Expanding Federal Conservation Corps Programs in Response to COVID-19."

⁶ The federal agencies authorized to administer conservation corps programs vary under law. However, broadly speaking, these agencies fall under the Department of the Interior (DOI), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Department of Commerce (DOC). In DOI, authorized agencies may include the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Geological Survey. In USDA and DOC, the applicable agencies are the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), respectively.

This report provides a brief history of federal conservation corps programs, starting with the CCC, and an overview of the YCC and PLC programs as they operate today. Although the CCC served as a model for a number of subsequent youth employment and service programs—both federal and nonfederal—this report focuses on federal programs. The report also briefly discusses other federal service and youth programs that may have a conservation-related component. Finally, the report analyzes several potential legislative options, should Congress consider expanding federal conservation corps programs to address unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These options are not comprehensive but rather provide a broad overview of possible options available to or previously considered by Congress.

Federal Conservation Corps Programs

Conservation corps typically refers to organizations or programs that engage young adults, veterans, and other groups in service projects that address outdoor recreation, natural resource conservation, disaster response, and community needs, among other focus areas. Modern-day conservation corps typically are run by private or nonfederal entities that may be based locally (e.g., Greencorps Chicago), regionally (e.g., California Conservation Corps), or nationally (e.g., Student Conservation Association). Although they vary in size, scope, and operations, these entities operate primarily through agreements with nonfederal partners, as well as authorized federal agencies.⁷ Conservation corps operating on federal lands typically enter into cooperative agreements with federal agencies to help administer and support the completion of specific projects.⁸

Although today's corps programs descend from the large, federal corps programs authorized during the Great Depression, their public-private partnership approach differs from the original conservation corps model of the CCC, which was operated and administered entirely at the federal level. To some degree, this shift was the result of a reduction in federal funding for corps programs during the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that time, states such as California, Iowa, Maryland, and Minnesota began to develop their own state-run conservation corps programs. Nonprofit organizations also began to develop corps programs in cities and regions across the country. With the growth of these new nonfederal corps programs and the cuts in federal funding, the model for federal conservation corps began to evolve into one largely reliant on partnerships with state and local corps to administer projects on federal lands.

As Congress considers conservation corps programs as a possible means to address unemployment caused by the COVID-19 crisis, it may be helpful to make some comparisons among the various federal corps models Congress has previously enacted. Below is a timeline and discussion of this evolution, starting with the CCC program of the 1930s and ending with the models in operation today. At the end of this discussion, **Table 1** highlights some of the primary distinctions and similarities among the programs covered in this report.

⁷ Some organizations that run corps programs also may implement projects on land the organization owns or holds some interest in (e.g., conservation easement).

⁸ Although conservation corps also administer projects on nonfederal lands, this report focuses primarily on conservation corps activities that take place on federal lands in partnership with authorized federal agencies.

Civilian Conservation Corps: 1933-1943

Overview and Establishment

Congress authorized the CCC in 1933 as part of the Emergency Conservation Work Act in response to the high unemployment rates caused by the Great Depression.⁹ The CCC was an employment program for unemployed males aged 18 to 25 (and veterans, Indians, and residents of territories of any age), wherein participants carried out conservation and infrastructure projects planned by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) on federal and nonfederal lands.¹⁰ In 1939, the agency was transferred through executive action to the control of what was then known as the Federal Security Agency.¹¹

CCC projects focused on creating and improving transportation and recreational services on federal and nonfederal lands, as well as tree planting and reforestation efforts. Over the course of the program, the CCC and its participants were responsible for the construction of much of the infrastructure seen today in national parks, forests, and historic sites, such as trails, lodges, roads, fire towers, campgrounds, and more. Through the CCC's state parks program, administered by DOI's National Park Service (NPS), enrollees helped to develop and create state parks across the country.

The CCC was designed as a federally led initiative that would use extensive government resources to address the needs of young, unemployed men. CCC enrollees were recruited, hired, and trained by the federal government, worked under federal supervision, lived in government-run military camps, and received stipends paid for with federal funding.¹² In addition, the federal government provided the medical and educational services available to enrollees as part of their service.¹³ In 1942 and 1943, Congress appropriated additional funds for the purposes of "the liquidation of the Civilian Conservation Corps," effectively ending the CCC program.¹⁴ When the program dissolved in 1943, it had employed nearly 3 million men over its 10-year authorization.¹⁵

⁹ Act of March 31, 1933, 48 Stat. 22. President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC; then referred to as *Emergency Conservation Work*) with the issuance of Executive Order 6101 on April 5, 1933 (Executive Order 6101, "Starting the Civilian Conservation Corps" (Washington: GPO, 1933)). Legislation creating an independent agency under the moniker *Civilian Conservation Corps* was enacted in 1937 (50 Stat. 319).

¹⁰ Enrollment in the CCC was limited to young men, although women were employed through the program, primarily in administrative roles. The 1933 legislation that established the CCC banned discrimination based on "race, color, or creed"; however, most African American enrollees served in segregated companies and were unable to attain positions of authority.

¹¹ Reorganization Plan Number 1 of 1939, April 25, 1939. In 1949, the Federal Security Agency was dissolved and most of its functions were transferred to the newly formed United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as part of President Eisenhower's Reorganization Plan No. 1 of 1953.

¹² The maximum stipend for CCC enrollees was \$30 per month (the equivalent of roughly \$500 today)—most of which enrollees were required to send home to support their families (50 Stat. 320).

¹³ Through the CCC educational program, thousands of participants were taught to read and write and a smaller number attained high school and college degrees.

¹⁴ Acts of July 2, 1942, Ch. 475, Title II, 56 Stat. 569, and July 12, 1943, Ch. 221, Title II, 57 Stat. 499.

¹⁵ For additional history of the CCC and its impact, see John C. Page, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933-1942: An Administrative History* (NPS, 1985); and, U.S. Congress, Senate. *Civilian Conservation Corps*. 77th Cong. 2nd Sess., Document No. 216. (Study produced by the Legislative Reference Service, LOC, in 1942).

Funding

Prior to its legislative establishment in 1937, Congress provided appropriations to the CCC as part of larger appropriations packages known as Emergency Relief Appropriation (ERA) acts. As a result, it is difficult to determine exactly how much federal funding was provided to the CCC during the program's initial years. Starting in 1937, Congress began providing stand-alone appropriations for the CCC. Non-ERA appropriations fluctuated over the years, peaking in FY1938, when Congress appropriated \$350 million for the CCC.¹⁶ Adjusted for inflation, this would equal roughly \$5.9 billion in real 2020 dollars.¹⁷

Youth Conservation Corps: 1970-Present

Overview and Establishment

In 1970, Congress established the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), a summer employment program for young people with the aim to “further the development and maintenance of the natural resources of the United States.”¹⁸ The YCC engages young people (aged 15-18) of any economic circumstance for 8-10 weeks over the summer months to work on conservation-related projects on federal lands and waters under the jurisdiction of DOI and USDA.¹⁹ Most YCC opportunities involve nonresidential programs, and enrollees are paid for their work.²⁰ Typically, authorized agencies (as specified in statute) determine on a site-by-site basis whether YCC programs can and should be implemented. Agencies may directly recruit and enroll participants, or agencies may enter into a cooperative agreement with a nonfederal conservation corps to oversee the operation of YCC projects. YCC projects can include building and repairing trails, preserving and repairing historic buildings, removing invasive species, helping with wildlife and land research, and leading environmental education.

Congress initially authorized the YCC as a three-year pilot program and permanently authorized it in 1972.²¹ The number of enrollees in the YCC has fluctuated over the program's history, with as many as 40,000 annual participants in the 1970s.²² Appropriations for the YCC declined substantially during the Reagan Administration in the early 1980s as part of larger federal budget cuts.²³ Agencies, however, have continued to administer YCC projects on a limited basis in some national parks and wildlife refuges, even without dedicated appropriations for the program.

¹⁶ Act of July 1, 1937, Ch. 425, 50 Stat. 469.

¹⁷ 1938 dollars have been converted to real 2020 dollars using the Real GDP (Chained) Table 1.1.6 from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, at <https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=19&step=2#reqid=19&step=2&isuri=1&1921=survey>.

¹⁸ 16 U.S.C. §§1701-1706.

¹⁹ 16 U.S.C. §1702. In 1972, Congress authorized the establishment of a grant-in-aid program to states to establish Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) programs on nonfederal lands (P.L. 92-597). However, Congress has not provided appropriations for the program since the early 1980s, and agencies typically have not used this authority since then.

²⁰ With regard to payment, YCC programs are exempt from prevailing wage and minimum wage laws. The YCC authorizing statute specifically requires the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to set the rates of pay or living allowances for the programs' participants. In addition, agencies are authorized in statute to provide transportation, lodging, subsistence, and other services, although YCC programs typically do not operate this way in practice.

²¹ P.L. 92-597, October 27, 1972, 86 Stat. 1319.

²² Congressional Budget Office (CBO), *Reducing the Federal Budget: Strategies and Examples*, February 1980, at <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/96th-congress-1979-1980/reports/80doc08b.pdf>. Hereinafter referred to as CBO, *Reducing the Federal Budget*.

²³ William Serrin, “Youth Work Programs Face Fight for Survival,” *New York Times*, July 12, 1981, p. 30.

Currently, USDA and DOI do not regularly report YCC participation figures. However, in its FY2021 budget justification, one DOI agency (NPS) reported 772 participants in YCC programs in FY2019.²⁴

Funding

In 1974, Congress permanently authorized up to \$60 million in discretionary appropriations per fiscal year for the YCC.²⁵ At various points during the 1970s, Congress provided appropriations at the full \$60 million level for the YCC (roughly \$202 million in real 2020 dollars).²⁶ However, since the early 1980s, Congress typically has not appropriated funding to the YCC under a dedicated account. Instead, participating agencies have relied on multiple funding streams to engage corps organizations in eligible projects. Due to the various funding streams across participating agencies and a lack of consistency in reporting, it is not possible to determine a total amount of federal appropriations for the YCC in recent years.

Young Adult Conservation Corps: 1977-1982

Overview and Establishment

Congress established the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) program as part of the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act of 1977.²⁷ The YACC was operated by USDA and DOI in cooperation with the Department of Labor (DOL).²⁸ The YACC provided year-round employment to young people aged 16 to 23, “to carry out projects on Federal or non-Federal public lands and waters.”²⁹ The program was open to individuals from all educational and economic backgrounds and was intended primarily to complete backlogs of high-priority work on state and federal lands. The YACC conducted both residential and nonresidential work programs and employed roughly 25,000 young adults at its peak.³⁰ Under law, 30% of funding for the YACC was set aside each year for a state grant program to implement YACC projects at the state and local levels.³¹ The remaining 70% was distributed equally between DOI and USDA based on an interagency agreement between the Secretaries. The 1982 Job Training Partnership Act repealed the program as part of broader cuts to conservation corps programs that took place during the Reagan Administration.³²

²⁴ NPS, *FY2021 Budget Justification*, p. ONPS-42.

²⁵ 16 U.S.C. §1706.

²⁶ For example, Congress appropriated \$60 million for the program for FY1978 (P.L. 95-74) and FY1979 (P.L. 95-456), with funding divided equally between DOI and USDA.

²⁷ P.L. 95-93, Title I, §101, August 5, 1977, 91 Stat. 627.

²⁸ The Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) also had a state grant-in-aid program for projects on nonfederal lands.

²⁹ P.L. 95-93, Title I, §101, August 5, 1977, 91 Stat. 627.

³⁰ CBO, *Reducing the Federal Budget*. For appropriations data, see Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Job Corps: Comparison of Federal Program with State Youth Training Initiatives (GAO/HEHS-96-92)*, March 1996, p. 7.

³¹ P.L. 95-93, Title I, §101, Aug. 5, 1977, 91 Stat. 630.

³² P.L. 97-300, Title I, §184(a)(1), October 13, 1982, 96 Stat. 1357.

Funding

When Congress authorized the creation of the YACC in 1977, it also authorized “such sums as may be necessary” to carry out the program for three years, through FY1980.³³ In 1978, Congress amended this authorization and authorized \$350 million for FY1979 and \$400 million for FY1980 to carry out the activities of the YACC.³⁴ Actual appropriations for the YACC reached just over \$250 million in FY1980 (roughly \$690 million in 2020 dollars) before Congress eliminated funding in 1982.

Public Lands Corps: 1993-Present

Overview and Establishment

Congress established the Public Lands Corps (PLC) in 1993 to encourage young people to carry out a wide range of service projects on eligible lands.³⁵ The Public Lands Corps Act, as amended, authorized DOI, USDA, and the Department of Commerce (DOC) to establish a job training and hiring program for young adults to engage in projects for the conservation, restoration, construction, or rehabilitation of resources on “eligible service lands.”³⁶ Participants must be 16-30 years of age (or up to 35 years of age for military veterans). Under law, the applicable Secretary (of DOI, USDA, or DOC) is authorized to establish a preference for the enrollment in the PLC of individuals who are economically, physically, or educationally disadvantaged.³⁷

Congress authorized DOI, USDA, and DOC to carry out PLC projects by entering into cooperative agreements with nonfederal organizations. The federal agency is required to cover up to 75% of the project costs, which include expenses related to providing for and supporting corpsmembers for the duration of their service. Nonfederal partners are required to cover the remaining 25%, which must come from nonfederal sources “in the form of funds, services, facilities, materials, equipment, or any combination of the foregoing.”³⁸ Under this model, the nonfederal partner organizations also are responsible for recruiting and hiring corpsmembers and helping to administer projects alongside federal agencies. For this reason, among others, it can be difficult to determine exactly how many participants federal agencies have engaged through PLC programs. In FY2019, NPS reported there were 6,461 participants hired through “youth-serving partner organizations” but did not specify whether these participants were hired under the PLC authority.³⁹

³³ P.L. 95-93, Title I, §101, Aug. 5, 1977, 91 Stat. 631.

³⁴ P.L. 95-524, Oct. 27, 1978, 92 Stat. 1933.

³⁵ P.L. 103-82. Codified at 16 U.S.C. §§1721 et seq.

³⁶ The Public Lands Corps’ (PLC’s) authorizing statute uses the term *appropriate conservation project*, defined as “any project for the conservation, restoration, construction or rehabilitation of natural, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational, or scenic resources” (16 U.S.C. §1722(1)). *Eligible service lands* means “public lands [lands or waters owned or administered by the United States], Indian lands, and Hawaiian homelands” (16 U.S.C. §1722(3)).

³⁷ 16 U.S.C. §1723(b).

³⁸ 16 U.S.C. §1729(a).

³⁹ NPS, *FY2021 Budget Justification*, p. ONPS-42.

Under law, corpsmembers are entitled to a “living allowance in an amount established by the Secretary.”⁴⁰ In practice, the individual corps organizations that hire the corpsmembers typically establish their weekly or monthly stipends. Agencies are authorized but not required to provide housing to corpsmembers for projects on federal lands.

Unlike the other conservation corps programs in this section, the PLC program model authorizes DOI, USDA, and DOC to offer noncompetitive hiring status to qualified corpsmembers who complete their service.⁴¹ This hiring status is available for up to two years following completion of service and typically is limited to the agency to which a corpsmember is deployed during his or her service.⁴² It is unclear how many PLC participants have been hired under this noncompetitive status.

Public Lands Corps Resource Assistant Program

When Congress established the PLC in 1993, it also provided for the establishment of a Resource Assistant Program (RAP). The RAP was established for individuals at least 17 years of age (as opposed to 16 years of age for PLC participants) with specific educational backgrounds.⁴³ The RAP acts as an internship program, wherein individuals carry out research or resource protection projects such as collecting data or performing tasks that may influence subsequent agency decisions or management practices.⁴⁴

Similar to PLC participants, resource assistants are eligible for direct appointment by the Secretary to a position with a land-managing agency for which the candidate qualifies.⁴⁵ Participants must first complete the RAP and earn an undergraduate or graduate degree from an accredited institution of higher education to be eligible for such placement.⁴⁶ Participants are eligible under this authority for a two-year period following the completion of their degree program.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ 16 U.S.C. §1726(a). Here and throughout this report, “the Secretary” refers to the relevant Secretary based on the federal agency authorized to oversee and administer projects that utilize corps partnerships. For FS projects, “the Secretary” refers to the Secretary of Agriculture; for NOAA projects, the Secretary of Commerce; and for all Interior agencies, the Secretary of the Interior.

⁴¹ DOI issued guidance regarding the PLC hiring authority, which indicates that eligibility for noncompetitive hiring status requires the completion of a minimum of 640 hours of satisfactory service on an appropriate conservation project, at least 120 hours of which must have been met through the PLC. (DOI, “Departmental Policy on Public Lands Corps Hiring Authority,” May 23, 2017.)

⁴² 16 U.S.C. §1726(d).

⁴³ 16 U.S.C. §1725(a).

⁴⁴ For example, the FS clarifies that, unlike participants in most PLC projects, which are primarily limited to physical labor projects, participants in the Resource Assistant Program (RAP) engage in projects that could influence subsequent agency decisions. Although partner organizations hire, pay, and provide housing to resource assistants, the assistants generally are supervised by FS staff, who define the tasks; monitor the work; and provide feedback, mentoring, and overall coordination of the resource assistants’ work. See FS, “Public Lands Corps Project Management & Operations: Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed August 31, 2020, at <https://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/youth-veterans-service/documents/FAQs-PLC-ProjectsManagementOperations.pdf>.

⁴⁵ 16 U.S.C. §§1725a-b.

⁴⁶ 16 U.S.C. §1725a(2).

⁴⁷ 16 U.S.C. §1725a(3). Initially, this hiring authority was provided only to the Secretary of the Interior and was not extended to the Secretary of Agriculture, despite USDA being authorized to administer the RAP. In December 2018, Congress extended the direct hire authority for the RAP to the FS, an agency within USDA, as part of the farm bill (P.L. 115-334, Title XII, §12518; 16 U.S.C. §1725b). With the authorization of the Secretary of Commerce in 2019 to administer the PLC program (P.L. 116-9), this hiring authority was subsequently extended to NOAA as well.

Funding

In 2005, Congress authorized \$12 million in discretionary appropriations per fiscal year for the PLC, “of which \$8,000,000 is authorized to carry out priority projects and \$4,000,000 ... is authorized to carry out other appropriate conservation projects.”⁴⁸ However, similar to YCC programs, Congress typically does not appropriate funding to the PLC under a dedicated account. NPS has funded PLC projects through various budget accounts, including the Youth Partnership Programs and Cyclic Maintenance accounts, and from revenues generated by recreation fees, which are available to the agency as mandatory spending under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA).⁴⁹ Other agencies have similarly used both discretionary appropriations and recreation fee revenues to fund projects that use corps programs.⁵⁰ Thus, funding for YCC- and PLC-eligible projects is determined at the agency level; typically, authorized officials at the field or regional level identify and submit potential YCC or PLC projects for funding, which are then considered as part of each agency’s annual budget process. Due to the various funding streams across participating agencies and a lack of consistency in reporting, CRS could not determine a total amount of federal appropriations for the PLC in recent years.

21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) Initiative

In 2012, the Obama Administration established the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) as a broad interagency initiative aimed at expanding opportunities and funding for youth employment and training on public lands and waterways across the country. The 21CSC operates as a public-private partnership between federal agencies and nonprofit, local, state, and tribal corps organizations that coordinates conservation corps activities and priorities nationwide. Since the 21CSC’s establishment, both the Obama and the Trump Administrations have considered most federal, state, tribal, local, nonprofit, and private sector conservation corps programs to fall under the broad umbrella of 21CSC programs. As a result, agencies often will refer to work conducted under the authority of the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and the Public Lands Corps (PLC) as *21CSC projects*. However, the term 21CSC has no underlying legislative authority. Therefore, federal programs that fall under the 21CSC umbrella (e.g., PLC and YCC) are referred to in this report under their statutory names.

⁴⁸ 16 U.S.C. §1730(a).

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining, *Current Public Lands, Forests, and Mining Bills*, hearing, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., April 25, 2013, S.Hrg. 113-28 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2013), p. 57. The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) is authorized at 16 U.S.C. §§6801-6814. For a more detailed explanation of FLREA, see CRS In Focus IF10151, *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act: Overview and Issues*, by Carol Hardy Vincent.

⁵⁰ At times, Congress has encouraged DOI and USDA agencies to use YCC and PLC programs for projects supported by funding from the annual Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. In particular, Congress has encouraged the use of corps programs for “purposes of fuels management activities” in recent legislation (P.L. 116-94). Appropriators also have regularly set broad limitations on the amount of funding allocated to YCC- or PLC-eligible projects for a particular agency. For example, in P.L. 116-94, Congress indicated that of the funding appropriated to the FS, up to \$5 million was available for priority projects carried out through YCC- and PLC-authorized partnerships.

Table 1. Comparison of Selected Federal Conservation Corps (1933-Present)

Program	Management Model	Term of Service	Age Eligibility	Living Accommodations	Paid (Y/N)
Civilian Conservation Corps (1933-1942)	Federal Management ^a	Minimum 6-month terms ^b	18-25 (men) ^c Unemployed	Residential	Y
Youth Conservation Corps (1970-Present)	Federal Management and Public-Private Partnership ^d	90 days per year	15-18	Usually Not Provided by Federal Government	Y
Young Adult Conservation Corps (1977-1982)	Federal Management ^e	12 months	16-23	Residential and Nonresidential	Y
Public Lands Corps (1993-Present)	Public-Private Partnership ^f	No statutory limit	16-30 and up to 35 for veterans	Usually Not Provided by Federal Government	Y

Source: Congressional Research Service.

- a. In this context, *Federal Management* indicates that the recruitment, hiring, management, and funding for corps participants was primarily overseen and conducted by the federal government rather than by nonfederal entities.
- b. Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees were allowed to reenroll at the end of each six-month term up to a maximum of two years.
- c. Age eligibility for the CCC varied over the course of the program's existence. At various points, eligibility was expanded to young men between the ages of 17 and 28. In 1937, Congress limited the eligibility to young men aged 17-23.
- d. In its early years, the Youth Conservation Corps programs were primarily administered by federal agencies. Since the early 1980s, agencies have relied largely on nonfederal partners to implement projects.
- e. The Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) also included a state and local program under which agencies were authorized to make grants or enter into other agreements with nonfederal partners. However, the YACC primarily operated as a federally run program.
- f. Under the Public Lands Corps statute, authorized agencies may hire enrollees directly for corps projects; however, in practice, agencies rely on nonfederal partners to implement projects.

Other Federal Service and Jobs Programs with Conservation Activities⁵¹

The YCC and the PLC are part of a wider landscape of federal programs intended to support youth and young adults with education, employment, and/or community service opportunities. These other federal programs tend to have a different focus than the YCC and the PLC because they provide broader educational services and enable youth to explore a range of employment or service opportunities across multiple career sectors. For this reason, these programs are not included in **Table 1**. Nonetheless, certain programs, such as Job Corps, administered by DOL, and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), include a conservation component, among other authorized activities.⁵²

⁵¹ Adrienne L. Fernandes-Alcantara, CRS Specialist in Social Policy, and Joselynn H. Fountain, CRS Analyst in Analyst in Education Policy, were the lead authors of this section.

⁵² The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) administers other programs, such as the AmeriCorps State and National Program, which include conservation-related work, among authorized activities. However, program participation in the AmeriCorps State and National Program is not limited to youth and does not include a residential component. For more information on programs administered by CNCS, see CRS Report RL33931, *The Corporation for*

Job Corps is authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).⁵³ The program consists of 121 centers throughout the country, with campuses that include residential facilities for students and buildings where students receive education and employment training. Job Corps participants have access to a variety of education and training opportunities, including English language courses, tutoring services, driver's education, and the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma or general equivalency degree. Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are eligible for the program if they are low income and meet certain barriers to employment (e.g., have a history of foster care, homelessness, or trafficking or have dropped out of school). Of the 121 centers, 96 are operated by private entities, most of which are for-profit organizations; 25 are Civilian Conservation Centers operated by the FS.⁵⁴ DOL transfers funding for these centers to USDA under an interagency agreement that has been in place since 2008.

As part of the academic and professional training required by Civilian Conservation Centers under WIOA, these centers offer work experience "to conserve, develop, or manage public natural resources or public recreational areas or to develop community projects in the public interest."⁵⁵ Further, enrollees in these centers may assist in addressing national, state, and local disasters, consistent with child labor laws and regulations. Participants in the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers program primarily work on projects on National Forest Service lands; however, crewmembers responding to natural disasters, such as forest fires, may operate on nonfederal lands as needed.

The NCCC is authorized under the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (NCSA), as amended.⁵⁶ The NCCC is a full-time residential program that focuses on short-term projects that meet national and community needs related to disaster relief, infrastructure improvement, and urban and rural development, as well as environment and energy conservation and environmental stewardship. Projects are not limited to federal lands and may serve the needs of community- and faith-based organizations; national nonprofits; schools; local, regional, and federal municipalities; national and state parks; and Native American and Alaskan Native tribes. Upon successful completion of the program, alumni receive a monetary award, which can be applied to future tuition costs or student loans. Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are eligible to participate. CNCS is required to take steps to ensure that 50% of participants are disadvantaged.⁵⁷

National and Community Service: Overview of Programs and Funding, by Joselynn H. Fountain and Abigail R. Overbay.

⁵³ 29 U.S.C. §§3101 et seq. For further information, see CRS Report R40929, *Vulnerable Youth: Employment and Job Training Programs*, by Adrienne L. Fernandes-Alcantara.

⁵⁴ For further information about Civilian Conservation Centers, see Larry J. Dawson and Alicia D. Bennett, *The U.S. Forest Service Job Corps 28 Civilian Conservation Centers*, USDA, U.S. FS, 2011, at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/38771>. Since the 2011 publication of that report, the Department of Labor (DOL) has closed the Golconda, Ouachita, and Treasure Lake centers and operation of the Centennial center has transferred from USDA to DOL.

⁵⁵ 20 C.F.R. §686.350(a).

⁵⁶ P.L. 101-610.

⁵⁷ *Disadvantaged youth* are defined at 42 U.S.C. §12511(b) as youth who are economically disadvantaged and one or more of the following: out of school, in or aging out of foster care, have limited English proficiency, homeless or have run away from home, at risk to leave school without a diploma, juvenile offenders or at risk of delinquency, individuals with a disability.

Options for Expanding Federal Conservation Corps Programs in Response to COVID-19

Due to rising unemployment stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, some Members have expressed interest in exploring various conservation corps models as a means to provide work relief to those affected.⁵⁸ This section provides an overview of some possible options available to Congress for expanding the federal conservation corps programs in response to the ongoing economic crisis brought on by COVID-19.⁵⁹ Such options include adjustments to existing conservation corps authorities, such as the YCC and PLC programs; changes to broader federal corps programs with conservation-related components (e.g., Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers and the NCCC); and possible opportunities to create new federal conservation corps programs. This section reflects both proposals that Congress has considered previously and additional options that may not be included in prior legislative proposals. The options outlined below are not intended to be a comprehensive list of the proposals introduced, nor do they cover the complete menu of possible options available to Congress regarding youth job and service programs and the unemployment crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress also may determine that current authorities and funding levels for conservation corps programs are sufficient and opt not to expand or create new programs.

Adjustments to Public Lands Corps and Youth Conservation Corps Programs

Congress routinely considers issues related to the YCC and PLC programs. At times, Congress has considered whether to contract or eliminate such programs. Generally, however, these issues concern whether or how to expand these programs to increase the number of individuals eligible for participation. Some additional issues deliberated by Congress include expanding the number of federal agencies authorized to enter into cooperative agreements with corps partner organizations, providing additional flexibility for agencies to offer noncompetitive hiring status to eligible corpsmembers, and using the existing corps-related authorities to establish new corps programs (e.g., programs aimed at specific communities or demographics). Congress may consider these options and others as a means to provide additional relief to Americans affected by the COVID-19 economic crisis.

Funding

Increasing federal funding to agencies that participate in YCC and PLC programs may be one way to enhance the enrollment and utilization of existing conservation corps programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress could, through the annual appropriations process, increase funding for the accounts from which agencies support corps-related projects (e.g., NPS's Youth Partnership Programs and Cyclic Maintenance accounts, which have funded Public Land Corps projects). Alternatively, Congress could appropriate discretionary funding to a dedicated account, specify uses of overall discretionary appropriations that have broader purposes, or

⁵⁸ For example, see Office of Rep. Marcy Kaptur, "Kaptur Civilian Conservation Corps Bill Included in Sweeping Climate Change Plan Unveiled by House Democrats," press release, June 30, 2020. Hereinafter referred to as Kaptur, 2020.

⁵⁹ For more information on the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. economy, see CRS Insight IN11388, *COVID-19: U.S. Economic Effects*, by Rena S. Miller and Marc Labonte.

provide direction in appropriations laws or accompanying reports about using funds for conservation corps purposes. For example, in the 116th Congress, S. 3684 would provide \$9 billion in supplemental appropriations through September 30, 2022, for the FS, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other agencies in response to the COVID-19 crisis.⁶⁰ The bill specifies that in carrying out projects and activities using supplemental funding, agencies must “to the maximum extent possible” use qualified youth or conservation corps, as defined in the Public Lands Corps Act.⁶¹

Congress also could increase the availability of mandatory appropriations for conservation corps purposes. For example, Congress might choose to amend or reestablish the formula used to apportion FLREA revenues to specify their use for corps-related activities or projects, such as by setting aside a percentage, a flat amount, or some other apportionment.⁶² Alternatively, Congress could amend other mandatory appropriations laws to allow specified funds to be used on YCC- and PLC-eligible projects, or it could authorize existing additional mandatory appropriations specifically for YCC and PLC purposes.⁶³

It is unclear whether, or to what extent, increased federal funding for PLC-related programs and projects would result in additional conservation corps job opportunities or project capacity. In addition, because PLC-authorized programs rely largely on cooperative agreements between federal agencies and nonfederal organizations to execute projects, an increase in funding to federal agencies may not necessarily result in an increase in corps participation and recruitment on the part of nonfederal partners. Stakeholders from the corps community have indicated that most corps organizations likely would be able to meet increased agency demand, should a modest increase in corps project funding occur.⁶⁴ However, the effect of substantially increased federal funding levels may depend on corps organizations’ ability to scale up their operations (i.e., recruitment and administration) to meet an increase in agency demands. As a result, the degree to which increased federal funding to PLC-related programs would address unemployment impacts resulting from COVID-19 is not immediately clear.

Unlike the PLC, authorized agencies do, at times, directly hire participants under the YCC model (although agencies also are authorized to enter into agreements with corps organizations for YCC recruitment and, in practice, do enter into such partnerships). Because of this, increased funding could more directly increase agencies’ capacity to use the YCC authority to expand existing programs. However, because YCC eligibility is limited to youth aged 15 through 18, and because the program is limited to 90 days per participant, expanding YCC funding is unlikely to address the long-term unemployment concerns raised by the COVID-19 crisis.

⁶⁰ S. 3684, 21st Century Conservation Corps for Our Health and Our Jobs Act. Section 2(d) of the bill also would waive matching fund requirements altogether for PLC projects funded through the proposed supplemental appropriations provided to federal agencies. Companion legislation (H.R. 7264) was filed in the House.

⁶¹ S. 3684 §2(c)(1).

⁶² Under FLREA, at least 80% of the revenue collected is to be retained and used to benefit visitors at the site where it was generated. For more information on FLREA, see CRS In Focus IF10151, *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act: Overview and Issues*, by Carol Hardy Vincent.

⁶³ For a list of federal land management agencies’ mandatory appropriations, see CRS Report R45994, *Federal Land Management Agencies’ Mandatory Appropriations Accounts*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent.

⁶⁴ For example, see 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) Federal Advisory Committee, *21st Century Conservation Service Corps: Full Report*, September 5, 2012. Hereinafter referred to as “21CSC Report.”

Match Requirements

Federal conservation corps programs like the PLC require a 25% match from nonfederal partners for project costs. In the past, stakeholders have indicated that many existing corps have difficulty raising the 25% required match and that this issue “could be exacerbated with an increase in federal support for [conservation corps] programs that requires programs to raise more match.”⁶⁵ Should Congress opt to provide additional federal funding for corps projects in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the existing match requirement could affect corps organizations’ ability to enter additional partnerships with federal agencies. To address some of these partner concerns, Congress might consider altering the matching requirements required by law, as some prior legislation has proposed. For example, S. 3684 and H.R. 7264 in the 116th Congress would waive matching fund requirements altogether for PLC projects funded through the proposed supplemental appropriations for COVID-19 relief. In the 115th Congress, H.R. 2987 proposed a federal project cost share of 90% to enable participation from a greater range of corps organizations.

The extent to which reducing the nonfederal match requirement might lead to an increase in recruitment for corps organizations is unclear. Reducing or altering match requirements could allow partners to allocate additional funding toward other operational needs, such as outreach and staffing improvements.

Eligibility and Outreach

Congress also might consider expanding the eligibility criteria of existing conservation corps programs as a way to increase participation. Congress previously expanded the age eligibility for the PLC program by increasing the age limit for participants from 25 to 30 years of age in 2016 and from 30 to 35 years of age for military veterans in 2019.⁶⁶ Congress could choose to further extend the age eligibility for programs authorized under the YCC or the PLC, or both, as a way to increase participation. Some lawmakers may see an expansion beyond the current age limits for the YCC and the PLC—which were established primarily as youth job training, employment, and placement programs—as out of step with the spirit of the programs. Such an expansion in age eligibility also might be at odds with the recruitment models currently in place for partner organizations, which may specialize in hiring young adults within the current age parameters.

Congress also could choose to establish new specialized programs within the existing YCC and PLC authorities to provide employment opportunities for specific communities. Congress did this in 2019 with the passage of P.L. 116-9, authorizing the creation of the Indian Youth Corps within the PLC program.⁶⁷ The Indian Youth Corps operates under the PLC authority but focuses specifically on enrolling American Indians and prioritizes projects and partnerships that benefit Indian tribes and their members.⁶⁸ Given that communities of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people with disabilities have seen high levels of unemployment resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, Congress might consider whether to establish similar authorities to those provided in the Indian Youth Corps to address particular needs within these communities.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ 21 CSC Report, p. 25.

⁶⁶ P.L. 114-289, §302; P.L. 116-9, §9003.

⁶⁷ 16 U.S.C. §1727b.

⁶⁸ 16 U.S.C. §1727b(a).

⁶⁹ For example, see Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, “Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, June 1, 2020, at

The degree to which such expansions might increase participation in conservation corps programs is unclear. The Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce already have the authority to establish new corps programs that prioritize specific communities, so long as those programs comply with the provisions of the PLC and YCC statutes. (This authority is limited and does not permit the Secretary to expand the program administratively in other ways, notably with regard to age eligibility and hiring authorities.) Various Administrations have used these authorities over the years. For example, the Obama Administration set a goal of expanding youth and service corps participation through the 21CSC initiative (see previous text box) with an emphasis on recruitment and outreach to traditionally underserved communities. The degree to which these administrative efforts were successful in expanding corps participation is unclear. Currently, estimates posit that more than 25,000 veterans and young adults participate in 21CSC corps organizations each year, up from the 20,000 estimated participants in similar programs in 2012.⁷⁰

Adjustments to Other Federal Service and Job Programs with Conservation Activities

Congress may consider expanding other federal service and job corps programs in response to the COVID-19 crisis. As noted, some of these programs, such as Job Corps and the NCCC, may provide opportunities for conservation-related work in addition to other authorized activities. In expanding such programs to provide additional job and training opportunities to young Americans, Congress could propose changes similar to those discussed in prior sections related to the PLC and YCC programs. Such changes include the provision of additional funding, expansion of eligibility criteria, or other similar proposals. However, unlike programs that use partnerships with nonfederal corps organizations to conduct work on federal lands, programs such as Job Corps and other federal service programs are often run and administered directly by the federal government. As a result, efforts to expand these programs may allow for more direct federal employment and training opportunities without relying on nonfederal entities' capacity to conduct outreach and recruitment. Congress could make changes to these programs generally, which may or may not provide additional support to those programmatic components related to conservation work. Alternatively, Congress could opt to focus primarily on expanding opportunities related to conservation work and projects located on federal lands, in which case providing additional support to the conservation-related aspects of these programs (e.g., Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers) also may be an option.

For example, the House passed the Heroes Act (H.R. 6800) on May 15, 2020, to provide emergency supplemental appropriations for FY2020 in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Among its provisions, the bill would provide the Job Corps program with additional flexibility around participants' age eligibility, as well as for career counseling and job placement services provided through the program.⁷¹ These provisions would apply to all components of Job Corps, including the 24 Civilian Conservation Centers operated by the FS.⁷² The degree to which this expanded

<https://files.epi.org/pdf/193246.pdf>. See also Julie Moreau, "LGBTQ People Face Higher Unemployment amid Coronavirus Pandemic, Survey Finds," NBC News, May 12, 2020, at <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/lgbtq-people-face-higher-unemployment-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-survey-finds-n1205296>.

⁷⁰ 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, at <http://21csc.org/>. These figures encompass participants in corps programs across the country on federal and nonfederal lands. Participants in projects authorized under the YCC and the PLC are likely included in these figures.

⁷¹ H.R. 6800, §120202.

⁷² H.R. 6800 also would direct the CNCS to conduct a study on the feasibility of increasing the capacity of national service programs across the country to respond to the COVID-19 crisis (see §150206). The study would be limited to

flexibility would specifically affect enrollment or participation in conservation-related work is unclear.

In addition to H.R. 6800, the Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act (S. 3624) was introduced in the Senate in May 2020. The bill aims to provide for 750,000 participants, over three years, in national service programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis.⁷³ The bill would make numerous changes and expansions to certain existing service and corps programs, including the NCCC.⁷⁴ Among its provisions, S. 3624 would provide \$1 billion in funding specifically for the NCCC program for FY2020.⁷⁵ It is unclear whether, and how, such funding would apply specifically to conservation activities under the NCCC. Although the bill mentions using programs such as the PLC to achieve its stated goal of providing for 750,000 participants in national service programs, it does not appear to make any specific changes or provide additional resources to PLC programs. Instead, it includes a provision requiring the development of a plan to improve coordination between programs authorized under the NCSA and other “covered programs,”⁷⁶ including the YCC and the Indian Youth Corps within the PLC.

Establishment of New Conservation Corps Programs

Rather than amend existing conservation corps programs, Congress could choose to establish new programs. This approach offers broad authority to define such a program’s purposes and attributes. Congress might choose to define or specify features of a program, such as eligibility criteria; education, career training, or job placement services; eligible projects or settings for projects; participating federal agencies; hiring preferences; housing, pay, stipends, or other forms of compensation and material support; participation of nonfederal partner organizations, federal agencies, or other groups; and more. Such an approach may allow Congress to address concerns or uncertainties regarding other conservation corps models. For example, Congress could specify that a new program’s participants are to be directly employed or enrolled through the program (as with the CCC) and set legislative targets or mandates for participation. This approach would bring the number of participants more directly under federal control, as opposed to programs in which nonfederal partners manage recruitment and hiring.

Some Members have expressed an interest in reestablishing a large, federal program in the same spirit as the original CCC. Introduced in April 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, H.R. 2358 would reestablish the CCC to provide gainful employment to “citizens of the United States, who are otherwise unemployed or underemployed” for maintenance, restoration, and construction work on federal lands.⁷⁷ In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, the proposal has been considered by some Members as a potential option for addressing the economic impacts of the pandemic.⁷⁸

existing corps programs overseen by the CNCS, such as the NCCC program, and apparently would not encompass PLC- and YCC-authorized programs. Service opportunities related to natural resource conservation or public lands are not listed as topics for consideration in the feasibility study.

⁷³ S. 3624, §3.

⁷⁴ S. 3624 would make changes and expansions to national service programs authorized under the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. §§12501 et seq.) and the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (42 U.S.C. §§4950 et seq.).

⁷⁵ S. 3624, §9(b).

⁷⁶ S. 3624, §7.

⁷⁷ H.R. 2358, §2.

⁷⁸ Kaptur, 2020. (“‘As Americans grapple with the economic fallout resulting from COVID-19, a federal jobs program like the Civilian Conservation Corps not only makes sense, it is desperately needed,’ said Rep. Kaptur.”)

Similar to the original CCC, this program would authorize the President to provide housing, food, clothing, medical care, and cash allowance, as may be necessary, to corps members during their employment period.⁷⁹ H.R. 2358 would authorize \$16 billion to be appropriated for each of FY2019 through FY2022 for the establishment of the new CCC.

The COVID-19 crisis may be impetus to consider other legislation introduced prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. For example, bills introduced in 2019 proposed the establishment of a Veterans Conservation Corps,⁸⁰ to engage veteran populations on public lands, and a Stewardship Corps, to provide training opportunities for careers in the forest and wetland restoration sector to youth from low-income communities, indigenous communities, and communities of color.⁸¹ Unlike the original CCC, which was established initially as an independent agency, these proposals would operate through existing federal departments and agencies.⁸²

These and other potential proposals to establish new, federally managed conservation corps programs could be opposed on various grounds. At the broadest level, some may object to the creation of a new federal program or agency as an unnecessary expansion of the federal government or may raise concerns around the potentially large fiscal impact of such an initiative. Other concerns may stem from specific program details. For instance, should a new federal corps program operate through existing agencies, any additional administrative responsibilities could strain those agencies' resources, absent concomitant funding and personnel increases.

Existing state, local, and privately run corps organizations also may object to the creation of new federal corps programs, particularly if those new programs are entirely federally managed and administered. Because conservation corps models such as the PLC primarily operate through public-private partnerships, a new program operated entirely through the federal government could affect corps organizations' ability to partner with federal agencies moving forward by reducing demand and funding for their services. In the past, some stakeholders have encouraged federal conservation corps programs to "be operated primarily by non-federal partners."⁸³ By relying on the existing infrastructure and expertise of nonfederal corps organizations, as these proponents have suggested, federal agencies would be able to more effectively reduce costs and engage communities through local partnerships.

Conclusions

There are numerous options available to Congress, should it consider using federal conservation corps programs in response to the economic crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These options range in scale and implementation from the creation of new federal agencies and programs—much like the CCC of the 1930s—to the expansion of existing conservation corps programs that rely on the infrastructure and experience of nonfederal partners. Given the wide range of potential options available to Congress, the scale, scope, and fiscal impact of any particular corps program would be highly dependent on the selected approach.

⁷⁹ H.R. 2358, §3(b).

⁸⁰ H.R. 2274.

⁸¹ H.R. 4629, §204, and S. 2452, §204.

⁸² For example, the Veterans Conservation Corps, as proposed in H.R. 2274, would be administered through the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in cooperation with other agencies.

⁸³ 21 CSC Report, p. 6. The committee did recognize that some 21CSC programs, such as the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers and the National Civilian Community Corps, would continue to be federally run.

In addition, it may be difficult for Congress to adopt any long- or short-term legislative proposals that address issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic due to the ongoing uncertainty associated with the pandemic itself. For example, in the event that economic issues resulting from the crisis are resolved due to the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, highly effective treatments, or other unknown factors, the authorization of new programs or agencies designed to address those issues could become unnecessary or ineffective. Many of the proposed programs discussed in the report aim to curb the unemployment crisis caused as a result of the pandemic. However, due to the challenges associated with tracking unemployment data, as well as uncertainty in whether job losses resulting from COVID-19 may be permanent or temporary, crafting legislative solutions to such problems may prove difficult.⁸⁴ The time required to implement new legislative measures also may limit their effectiveness, if pandemic-related employment conditions change quickly. Nonetheless, some may view the proposals discussed in this report to have benefits that extend beyond COVID-19 and the immediate needs presented by the virus. Overall, these factors and others may determine whether or how Congress chooses to consider the role of conservation corps programs moving forward.

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⁸⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the challenges associated with the collection and classification of unemployment data caused by COVID-19, see CRS Insight IN11456, *COVID-19: Measuring Unemployment*, by Lida R. Weinstock.