

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SB 5255

As Reported By House Committee On:
Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to the Washington conservation corps.

Brief Description: Changing Washington conservation corps provisions.

Sponsors: Senators Jacobsen, Oke, Rasmussen and Finkbeiner; by request of Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 3/24/99, 3/26/99 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Bill
(As Amended by House Committee)

- Repeals sunset provisions and permanently enables the Washington Conservation Corps program.
- Expands the Washington Conservation Corps program goals.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Buck, Republican Co-Chair; Regala, Democratic Co-Chair; Anderson, Democratic Vice Chair; Sump, Republican Vice Chair; G. Chandler; Doumit; Eickmeyer; Ericksen; Rockefeller and Stensen.

Staff: Josh Weiss (786-7129).

Background:

The Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) was created in 1983 and was enacted to provide work experience and skills to the youth of the state between the ages of 18 and 25. WCC projects support conservation, rehabilitation, and enhancement of the state's

natural, historic, environmental, and recreational resources. Corps members are usually hired for six to 12 months and receive minimum wage.

While state law authorizes six state agencies to implement the WCC, only four have done so. The Department of Agriculture and Department of Employment Security do not have WCC programs, while the Department of Ecology, Department of Natural Resources, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and State Parks and Recreation Commission have active WCC programs. These four active programs have received a total of \$12.3 million for their WCC programs over the last five fiscal years. In these five fiscal years, 1866 men and women have enrolled in the WCC through one of the above mentioned four agencies.

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee performed a sunset review of the program, issuing its report on October 6, 1998. In addition to recommending continuation of the program, the report made four suggestions for improvement. Apart from providing legislative authority to continue the program, only one other recommendation required legislative action. This recommendation was to formulate a legislative decision on whether to dedicate a portion of the WCC general fund appropriation to economically distressed areas or populations. If such a dedication is desired, agencies should be required to track those expenditures in order to demonstrate compliance.

Absent specific legislative action, the powers and duties for the WCC will sunset on June 30, 1999, and the enabling and operating statutes will be repealed on June 30, 2000.

Summary of Amended Bill:

Sunset review provisions are repealed and the WCC is permanently enabled. WCC program goals are expanded to include: eco-tourism and heritage tourism, statewide water quality, and salmon recovery. The position of "crew supervisor" is defined, and the maximum length of enrollment is set at two years.

Reference to the Department of Agriculture is removed, and language authorizing a WCC program in this department is repealed. Reference to the Youth Employment Exchange (now the Washington Service Corps) is removed, as this agency no longer coordinates the WCC.

References to duties of the Department of Employment Security are removed. Such duties included: evaluating projects; developing training plans; ensuring that preference is given to persons between the ages of 18 and 23; ensuring that corps members respond to emergency projects; and providing data on projects, project requests, applicants, and reports to the Legislature. Language referring to the Department of Employment Security as the centralized administrative authority for the WCC are repealed. Similarly,

language requiring the Washington Conservation Corps Coordinating Council to develop a cost-effective administrative system is repealed.

WCC programs are required to focus on distressed areas, which are defined according to the Washington State Development Loan Fund Committee. The economically distressed areas language referred to by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee report is repealed, thereby removing the ambiguity identified in the report.

Amended Bill Compared to Original Bill: The committee amendment repeals existing price cap language. Administrative costs are limited to 5 percent of available funds and administrative costs are defined. Administrative and program support costs are limited to 15 percent of available funds. Program support costs are also defined. The amendment also requires that 80 percent of available funds be expended for corps members' salaries and benefits and for direct supervision of corps members.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Testimony For: The Washington Conservation Corps is an integral part of the maintenance and operation of the state parks system. This is not a supplemental program, and not funding this program is equivalent to reducing the operating budget for the State Parks and Recreation Commission. Losing this program would be equivalent to losing one employee per park. The Washington Public Employees Association supports this bill.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Rex Derr, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission; Lynn McKinnon Washington Public Employees Association; and Jim King, Coalition for Parks and Recreation.