

HOUSE BILL REPORT

2SSB 5164

As Reported by House Committee On:
Agriculture & Natural Resources
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to expanding the veterans conservation corps program.

Brief Description: Expanding the veterans conservation corps program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Jacobsen, Hobbs, Shin, Rasmussen, Kilmer and Franklin).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 3/28/07 [DP];

Appropriations: 4/16/07 [DP].

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Expands the Veterans Conservation Corps to include both volunteer projects as well as training, education, certification, and placement programs.
- Creates a new Veterans Conservation Corps Account to be used for purposes of the Veterans Conservation Corps program.
- Requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide three reports to the Legislature on various issues concerning the Veterans Conservation Corps program.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 14 members: Representatives B. Sullivan, Chair; Blake, Vice Chair; Kretz, Ranking Minority Member; Warnick, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Dickerson, Eickmeyer, Grant, Hailey, Kagi, McCoy, Newhouse, Orcutt, Strow and VanDeWege.

Staff: Jaclyn Ford (786-7339).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) maintains a list of veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and related conditions who are interested in working on projects that restore Washington's natural habitat. The list is referred to as the Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC).

The DVA will submit a report to the Legislature by December 1, 2009, on the use of VCC members by state agencies and local sponsors of habitat restoration projects.

Summary of Bill:**The Veterans Conservation Corps:**

The intent of the Legislature is to provide Washington veterans the opportunity to obtain on-the-job training in environmental restoration and stewardship that leads to certification in a specific skill set and living wage employment.

New enrollment procedures for the VCC will be established by the DVA. The DVA is required to assist veterans who are enrolled in the VCC with obtaining employment in conservation programs and projects to restore habitat. Enrolled veterans may participate in the volunteer projects and/or the training, certification, and placement program.

For those veterans participating in the training, certification, and placement program, the DVA will consult with the Workplace Training and Education Coordinating Board, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Employment Security Department, and other state agencies to incorporate training, education, and certification in environmental restoration and management.

The DVA may also enter into agreements with community colleges, local governments, private schools, state or local agencies, and other entities to provide training and work. As a pilot project, the DVA may enter into an agreement with a local government, community college, or other entity for use of VCC enrollees in a project where training and work will begin prior to June 30, 2008.

In addition, the DVA will seek to enter agreements with federal agencies managing lands in Washington for the employment of VCC enrollees. Up to 20 percent of the costs may be provided by the DVA, including the costs of training provided on the project.

The Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) will cooperate with the DVA during calendar years 2007 and 2008 to inform salmon habitat project sponsors of the availability of VCC enrollees to perform project work. The SRFB may consider funds provided by the DVA for a project using VCC enrollees as match funding in the evaluation of projects for funding by the SRFB.

Reports:

The DVA will work with other state agencies administering conservation corps programs to maximize utilization of the programs. The DVA in conjunction with the other state agencies administering conservation corps programs will submit a report by September 30, 2007, to the Legislature and to the Office of Financial Management that identifies projects on state agency-managed lands that are currently planned, or are suitable for VCC enrollees and have funding in place, and additional projects that, if funded, would be suitable for VCC enrollees.

By September 30, 2008 the DVA will provide a report to the Governor and Legislature on agreements entered with federal agencies to employ VCC enrollees on federal land projects and provide recommendations for increasing the number of these agreements.

The DVA will also submit a report to the Legislature by December 1, 2008, on the status of the VCC program, including the number of enrollees employed in projects and training, certifications earned, employment placement achieved, program funding provided and the results of the pilot project. A list of projects funded by the SRFB that had VCC enrollee participation will also be included in this report, as well as recommendations for increasing the use of VCC enrollees in salmon habitat projects that receive funding from the SRFB.

The December 1, 2009, Legislative report on the use of VCC members by state agencies and local sponsors of habitat restoration projects is eliminated.

The Veterans Conservation Corps Account:

A new Veterans Conservation Corps Account (Account) is created. All receipts from gifts, grants, federal funds, or other moneys from public or private sources will be deposited into the Account. Moneys in the Account may be spent only after appropriation and may be expended only for purposes of the VCC program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This bill is great for veterans and Washington. Reduced and limited funding for conservation projects is problematic. The VCC is an excellent tool to fill needed employees in conservation management, as well as provide employment and training for veterans. Veterans have a difficult time finding employment after honorable service in the military; the VCC program both supports our troops and the conservation of our environment. The VCC provides a smooth transition from military to civilian jobs. Most veterans have a desire for public service. The VCC allows them to continue in service of our country and save our environment. Support our troops and save our sound.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Jim Crabbe, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; Mike Hrachovec, Natural Systems Design; Sara LaBorde, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife; Mark Seery, King Conservation Corps; Bill Robinson, The Nature Conservancy; and Don Freeman and Gordon Graham, Veterans Conservation Corps.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Joe La Tourrette, Pacific Coast Joint Venture.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 33 members: Representatives Sommers, Chair; Dunshee, Vice Chair; Alexander, Ranking Minority Member; Bailey, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Haler, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Anderson, Buri, Chandler, Cody, Conway, Darneille, Dunn, Ericks, Fromhold, Grant, Haigh, Hunt, Hunter, Kagi, Kenney, Kessler, Kretz, Linville, McDermott, McDonald, McIntire, Morrell, Pettigrew, Priest, Schual-Berke, Seaquist, P. Sullivan and Walsh.

Staff: Owen Rowe (786-7391).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Agriculture & Natural Resources:

No new changes were recommended.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) A wide range of organizations involved in conservation are dependent on volunteers for environmental restoration work. This bill goes a long way to provide on the job training to build foundations for careers in habitat restoration. Since 2002, there has been a 211 percent increase in post traumatic stress disorder cases. The most important thing that this program provides is an opportunity for veterans to connect with other veterans and the environment. It is a form of ecological therapy. The state and the federal government will save money on programs related to substance abuse and mental health treatment. This program is more of job training program than a volunteer program.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Bill Robinson, The Nature Conservancy; and Mark Seery.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.