

Why we need Obama's Veterans Conservation Corps

Guest columnist

In his State of the Union address last month and again at a recent press event, President Obama touted the idea of "a new conservation program that would help put veterans to work rebuilding trails,



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OPINION

roads and levees on public lands," according to The Associated Press. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the Civilian Conservation Corps of

the 1930s could be viewed as a model for what the administration will try to accomplish through its "Veterans Jobs Corps." The administration will propose spending \$1 billion that could put an estimated 20,000 veterans to work restoring habitat and eradicating invasive species, among other activities, the AP report stated.

Why would the Obama administration want a new conservation corps? Perhaps because, nearly 80 years after the first one was established, we are still reaping the benefits of the first one. The CCC was es-

tablished in 1933 primarily to do two things: put unemployed men to work and to help restore the land. In 1933, the unemployment rate was 25 percent; national forests and national parks had a backlog of projects and restoration needs but lacked the manpower and money to do the work. States like South Carolina had no state park system for similar reasons.

The combination of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and the devastated agricultural sector forced thousands to abandon their farms and leave behind depleted lands. President Franklin Roosevelt's administration bought up millions of acres of this land and put the CCC to work restoring it. The result was an expansion of the Eastern national forests from around 5 million acres in 1932 to 19 million acres by 1942 and their restoration. No one is suggesting that the federal government buy land, but the idea of restoring the land as FDR did is one worth serious discussion and consideration.

The CCC operated from

1933 until 1942 and employed 3 million men between the ages of 18 and 25 (even though first lady Eleanor Roosevelt supported its establishment, a female-only version of the CCC didn't last long because of cultural and gender mores at the time).

The workers lived in camps and were given "three hots and a cot" along with job training and the opportunity to fill gaps in their education as well as their growling stomachs. The men of the CCC constructed trails, buildings, dams and roads, and planted millions of trees that helped restore exhausted land. South Carolina used CCC muscle and money to build its state park system from scratch. In North Carolina, the CCC built the Blue Ridge Parkway and roads and trails in the national forests. The CCC has often been called one of the greatest New Deal programs, and with good reason. While healing abused forests and fields, the men gained their health and self-esteem; they restored the land, and the land restored them.

Today, the unemployment rate may be slowly coming down, but the so-



A Civilian Conservation Corps trail maintenance crew works in Nantahala National Forest in 1937. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

called "underemployment rate" — those who are unemployed plus those either working part time but would prefer full-time work, or have stopped searching for jobs — stubbornly remains above 15 percent.

Infrastructure around the country is dire need of repair — bridges need replacing, and overgrown forests need thinning. Ironically, a present-day Veterans Conservation Corps would be undoing some of the damage of the original CCC by thinning forests and remov-

ing invasive species planted to stop soil erosion. It might even be replacing bridges and buildings built in the 1930s.

The thousands of troops returning home face a difficult job market but possess practical experience in building and repairing infrastructure. Many soldiers have spent years "nation-building" in Iraq and Afghanistan; the United States has spent billions of dollars on those endeavors while our own infrastructure has gone neglected, with catastrophic results, like the

Minnesota bridge collapse in 2007, for example.

The Obama administration recognizes that a strong America in the future requires hard work now. A Veterans Jobs Corps program would be an investment in the future of America's youth and environment. Let them restore the land, and the land will restore them.

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