

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1246

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: Representatives Regala, Buck, H. Sommers, Huff, Linville and Haigh; by request of Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 2/2/99, 2/12/99 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

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

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Buck, Republican Co-Chair; Regala, Democratic Co-Chair; Anderson, Democratic Vice Chair; Sump, Republican Vice Chair; G. Chandler; Clements; Doumit; Eickmeyer; Ericksen; Pennington; 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 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, 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.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: The Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) program is a win-win situation for the state providing job experience to the state's youth and accomplishing important environmental projects. The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee recommended continuation. Since 1993 over 1800 young adults have participated in this program, and over 5500 have participated since 1983. The WCC provides opportunities to youth that otherwise wouldn't exist, especially since the agencies try to involve those that don't have any work experience. Projects include salmon recovery, trail improvements, and winter feeding of wildlife. Projects have built over 300 miles of wildlife control fencing and completed 645 building renovations. Dollar for dollar this is the highest environmental value available, and would have cost agencies millions of dollars to accomplish the same tasks. The bill does not increase spending, but maintains the WCC program at its existing level.

The WCC program has allowed the Department of Natural Resources to complete maintenance projects on over half of its campgrounds. Training for WCC enrollees includes classroom training. The Parks and Recreation Commission uses WCC enrollees in crews that work on larger maintenance projects, and also places individual enrollees with parks' staff in specific parks. In Lewis & Clark State Park there are numerous historic buildings which require enormous maintenance that has been accomplished by WCC enrollees. Many visitors to the park appreciate the work that the WCC program has accomplished. It can't be stressed enough how valuable the WCC program has been for the maintenance of the state parks. The WCC benefits its enrollees, state agencies, and the public.

HB 1246 is a reauthorization and unless it is passed, the WCC program will go away. The WCC is helpful for salmon recovery which has come to the forefront in the last year. The Department of Ecology has restored 12 miles of salmon habitat in the last year using WCC volunteers. The WCC is faster, better, and cheaper than using other alternatives. For example, a project bid at \$75,000 only costs \$50,000 for the WCC to accomplish.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Representative Debbie Regala, prime sponsor; Pam Wilkins-Ripp, State Parks and Recreation Commission; Gordon White, Department of Ecology; Steve Shurlock, Department of Fish and Wildlife; and Sheryl Wimberly, Department of Natural Resources.