

Salinas Californian

Luis Alejo: Tri-county area rich in Conservation Corps tradition

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When the Pajaro River overflowed in the 1990s, flooding basements and yards with mud, the dedicated young men and women of the California Conservation Corps were there to help with the cleanup efforts, as they were throughout the Central Coast region after the Loma Prieta earthquake.

When concrete sidewalks were falling apart in the City of Salinas, corpsmembers assisted the city's replacement efforts.

When the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge needed erosion control and trail construction, the Corps got the job done.

These are a few examples of the Corps' work over the years. The CCC's Monterey Bay Center in Watsonville — with its nearly 90 locally hired young men and women — trains the environmental conservation crews and dispatches emergency responders to natural disasters throughout the state.

Since its founding in 1976, corpsmembers from the Oregon state line to the Mexican border have provided more than 67 million hours of natural resource work — planting more than 20 million trees; improving nearly 2,000 miles of streams and fish habitats, including Elkhorn Slough and Watsonville Wetlands; building or maintaining 9,000 miles of trails and improving park and recreation areas.

From Henry Coe State Park and Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area to San Benito County Historical Park, the Corps' handiwork can be seen in the trails, plant and habitat restoration projects.

In addition, corpsmembers have put in more than nine million hours of dedicated work in just about every natural emergency — including fires, floods, oil spills, earthquakes, search and rescues and agricultural catastrophes — often working 12 hours a day for up to 14 days at a time to save lives, homes and businesses.

These dedicated corpsmembers earn the minimum wage, but their reward is much more. Corpsmembers will tell you it is the satisfaction of helping fellow Californians during times of distress.

The CCC requires all corpsmembers to further their education while in the program. During their time of service, many members take advantage of classroom instruction to earn high school diplomas or earn scholarship funds for college. Others hone their skills in environmental conservation — such as assisting low-income families by doing home repair and weatherization work for Central Coast Energy Services. And, of course, many CCC graduates leverage their training to land jobs as firefighters and emergency responders.

As a member of the Assembly's Budget Committee, I am constantly looking for ways for the government to make the biggest impact without wasting a single dollar. The CCC is an opportunity to build a resume, garner real work experience, and contribute to the community. The California Conservation Corps is a national model and a peerless example of a state program done right.

Luis Alejo represents the 28th District in the California State Assembly, which consists of San Benito County, the Salinas Valley, North Monterey County, South Santa Clara County and the city of Watsonville.