

Jim Nielsen: Conservation Corps fulfills its promise

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Over the years we have been quite critical of wasteful government spending on programs that either did not work or were not necessary in the first place. But one program stands out as an example of a program that fulfills its promise — the California Conservation Corps.

The legendary former Director B. T. Collins, who was a close friend, articulated a vision that has resulted in an agency that changes lives for the better.

This fall, the Corps is celebrating its 35th anniversary and continues to make a difference in protecting our environment and training young people for a bright future.

Throughout the state, and particularly in the Redding area, the young men and women of the CCC have received the state's undying gratitude for their often heroic efforts in responding to natural disasters and leading environmental conservation efforts.

Many of these young men and women join the Corps because they simply want to improve the quality of life for Californians. Others join because they are at a crossroads in their lives and aren't sure which road to take. If they have dropped out of high school, they use their down time to complete coursework to get their diploma. If they are looking for work, they hone their skills and leverage their experience on fire crews and working with land management agencies to secure jobs as firefighters or obtain positions with the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and other agencies. The Corps even has a new conservation program exclusive to returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Redding is home to one of the Corps' nonresidential centers with 70 members, including four trail crews and one fire crew. In fact, Redding has had an initial-attack fire crew for 10 years, working with the U.S. Forest Service to protect lives and valuable property.

Since 1976, Corps members have spent more than 9 million hours of dedicated work statewide in just about every large emergency — including fires, floods, oil spills, earthquakes, search and rescues and agricultural catastrophes.

What do these 18- to 25-year-olds get in return for their hard, often dangerous, work? As Collins famously said, the Corps members' rewards are "hard work, low pay, miserable conditions and more."

Corps members are truly dedicated public servants, happy to be working 12-hour shifts for up 14 days at a time to save homes, businesses and public lands for the betterment of our state and to gain valuable life skills and work experience. To them, these harsh conditions and long hours merely come with the territory.

Over the years, Corps members also have provided more than 65 million hours of work to protect our natural resources — planting more than 20 million trees, improving nearly 2,000 miles of streams and fish habitat, building or maintaining 9,000 miles of trails and improving park and recreation areas.

Their footprints are everywhere. They have built trails and bridges connecting Redding's interconnected trail system, constructed new trails accessing the Sacramento River throughout Redding and connected and repaired trails throughout Lassen Volcanic National Park. On any day, you can find Redding Corps members working on fire hazard reduction projects in Whiskeytown National Recreation Area and other regional sites.

With inmates becoming scarce or too dangerous for fire crews, there's a need for even more CCC firefighters.

As the California Conservation Corps celebrates its 35th anniversary, I commend the hard work of these dedicated Corps members and salute them for the important role they play in fighting fires, ensuring good stewardship of our public lands and improving our community.

Jim Nielsen represents the Second Assembly District in the California Legislature.