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VIEWPOINT: Corps celebrates 35 years of conservation in California

By Katcho Achadjian

This year, the California Conservation Corps (CCC) celebrates its 35th anniversary. The dedicated young men and women of the CCC have earned the state's undying gratitude by toiling selflessly fighting forest fires and pest infestations, holding back raging floodwaters and preserving California's precious environmental resources. Statewide, corpsmembers 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, building or maintaining 9,000 miles of trails and improving park and recreation areas.

Working out of the Los Padres residential center on the grounds of Camp San Luis Obispo and a nonresidential facility in Santa Maria, corpsmembers have maintained the popular Bishop Peak trail in San Luis Obispo and worked on fish habitat improvement and erosion control in Morro Bay. Current projects include removing invasive eucalyptus trees along Santa Rosa Creek to improve steelhead trout habitat, and construction of a seven-mile fence to keep deer and bears off the Cuesta Grade Highway 101 corridor.

As a former member of the California Coastal Commission, I greatly appreciate the CCC's work building the Moonstone Beach boardwalk in Cambria and the elephant seals viewing boardwalk and decks north of San Simeon.

Corpsmembers sign up for a year in the CCC and earn minimum wage. While serving California's citizens, corpsmembers improve their academic skills through a wide range of

classes. If they haven't finished high school, they can earn their diplomas and, later, earn college scholarship money.

For many, the Corps eases their transition to the state's labor force by honing their skills in environmental conservation — such as habitat restoration, solar projects and weatherization — fire protection and emergency response. Working with California's community colleges, the CCC's Careers Pathways program offers specific work experience, education and training.

Environmental conservation, however, is just part of the Corps' mission. It has become an instrumental emergency response component. In the past 35 years, these 18- to 25-year-old corpsmembers have spent more than 9 million hours of dedicated work in just about every large 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.

CCC crews are dispatched where needed. Often, they've been needed here at home, helping to clean up the 1992 Avila Beach oil spill and earlier San Luis Creek spills. They responded to the Highway 41 fire in 1994 and the San Simeon Earthquake in 2003. It's hard and dangerous work, but the Corps wouldn't have it any other way.

I congratulate the California Conservation Corps on its 35th anniversary and would like to thank the thousands of current and former corps members who have contributed to its success.

Assemblyman Katcho Achadjian represents all of San Luis Obispo County and the northern portion of Santa Barbara County in the state Assembly.