

Co-Chair Lew Frederick
Co-Chair Susan McLain
Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Education
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

April 19, 2023

RE: HB 5025 - Support for funding Oregon Conservation Corps

Dear Co-Chair Frederick and Co-Chair McLain,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission's (HECC) budget. The HECC provides vital services for our communities and we are writing to request continued funding of one their critical programs, the Oregon Conservation Corps.

The Oregon Conservation Corps (OCC) was established under the comprehensive wildfire package, SB 762 (2021) and provided with \$10 million for the biennium to invest in wildfire resiliency and youth workforce development initiatives in communities across Oregon. OCC is a critical element of SB 762 and has demonstrated huge impact in promoting community wildfire resiliency and building a future wildfire workforce in its first 2 years. The Governor's Recommended Budget did not include continued funding for the 2023-25 biennium.

The OCC Advisory Committee, whose members are Governor-appointed, helped to design the grant offering for the program, has overseen the distribution of \$10 million in grants, and has tracked the implementation of local programs in 11 counties across the state. **As of 12/31/22, the program has trained 213 youth who have worked 34,500 hours to treat 1,300 acres and protect 733 structures, with even more impacts underway in Q1 and Q2 of 2023.** So far, Oregon Conservation Corps programs have been launched in Benton, Clackamas, Crook, Deschutes, Douglas, Jackson, Jefferson, Josephine, Klamath, Lane, and Polk Counties and continued funding will allow the OCC to have an even broader impact. It is not an exaggeration to say that the treatments implemented and the firefighters trained under the OCC so far could mean the difference between many Oregonians' homes surviving wildfires or not this summer.

The Oregon Conservation Corps is an innovative program. It is unique and effective because it funds youth workforce organizations directly to train and certify young adults and complete home ignition zone treatments in high priority low-income neighborhoods. Established, experienced youth corps organizations partner with the Office of the State Fire Marshall, local fire chiefs, and Oregon Department of Forestry to ensure priority sites are selected and treated to standards. These small acreage projects right in and among homes are often the "missing link" to protect communities and are important to fund and combine with larger scale fuels treatments.

The OCC Advisory Committee is proud of the impact that the Oregon Conservation Corps has had in its first two years and believes this program is an excellent investment in wildfire resiliency and a future wildfire workforce for the state of Oregon. We urge the Committee to fully fund the HECC's Policy Option Package 301 which includes \$10 million for the Oregon Conservation Corps and \$2 million dedicated to Tribal Youth Corps funding to build upon the impressive start and momentum of OCC. Our communities and youth depend on it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brooke", written in a cursive style.

Brooke Brownlee
Chair, Oregon Conservation Corps