

Testimony of Tyson Bertone-Riggs, Coalition Director for the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

U.S. Senate Climate Task Force

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Chairman Markey and Members of the Subcommittee:

Ladies and gentlemen of the Task Force, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Tyson Bertone-Riggs, and I am the Coalition Director for the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC). RVCC is a coalition of rural community-based nonprofits whose mission is to develop an engaged and diverse network of community leaders, researchers, and restoration practitioners who advance policy solutions that promote ecologically responsible and economically equitable outcomes that advance rural community vitality through land stewardship. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

RVCC engages at all scales of the issue of land stewardship and conservation, helping to interpret new and emerging policy for practitioners, organizing trainings and peer learning exchanges in the field, and to share back with decision makers for adaptation and ideally, adoption. Our current work includes focus on prescribed fire, the practices of collaborative decision-making, cross-boundary restoration, and fire risk reduction. decision-making, and cross-boundary restoration and fire risk reduction.

Community-based nonprofit organizations are at the forefront of the work that we do. Such groups play a critical role in rural communities as bridging organizations, connecting communities to federal programs, and often fostering and housing the workforce needed to accomplish land stewardship and conservation projects.

My work with the coalition has included research and policy work, but I also have more applied experience, having worked for both the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Forestry. I'm also proud to say that I worked a season for Northwest Youth Corps; my first job working in the woods.

I'm honored to appear before the Task Force today to share my perspective on public lands conservation and the value of significant investment in a 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps.

Today, we face an unprecedented combination of challenges to our public lands, to our public-lands adjacent rural communities, and to the country as a whole. I'll restrict myself to the topics I know best, but let me say up front that climate change runs as a thread throughout all of the challenges we face. I'd

like to address the combined challenges of persistent rural poverty and underinvestment in our public lands - or natural infrastructure, if you will.

Rural Economies in Crisis

Rural communities face disproportionate economic hardships compared to the nation on the whole. Rural areas overall have yet to recover to employment levels prior to the 2008 recession, and poverty remains an all too common problem in rural communities.¹ And now, rural communities have yet again been hit hard by the current pandemic and economic downturn.

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2019 the median household income outside of metropolitan statistical areas was about \$52,000 - nearly \$20,000 less than in urban areas.² The US Department of Agriculture reports that the rural poverty rate was 16.4 percent in 2017, compared with 12.9 percent for urban areas.³

The kinds of jobs in rural communities have also changed. While traditional woods work and timber jobs still exist in some communities, and constitute an important part of those economies, rural communities need new kinds of jobs that still make use of existing skills. Jobs that focus on improving ecosystems and responding to the climate emergency, as well as recreation jobs that make use of public lands.

I want to be clear: this is not an “urban-rural divide” problem. Poverty also concentrates in cities, and while the nature of the problem may differ (unaffordable housing versus lack of housing stock, for instance), we should look for approaches that center communities in crafting solutions that meet local needs.

Public Lands at a Turning Point

America’s 193 million acres of national forests are critical natural resource assets that provide significant value to local communities, the states within which they reside, and the nation as a whole. They provide clean drinking water to over 180 million people, are part of a matrix of lands supporting a broad range of native plants and animals, as well as first foods for native people - and have, since their creation, provided significant recreational and economic benefits as well.⁴

In 2021 America’s national forests face unprecedented threats, including growing risk of severe wildfire in the West, insect and disease epidemics, and loss of species habitat. Climate change exacerbates these already critical challenges and threatens to transform entire landscapes, disrupting the ecological and

¹ Ajilore, O and Willingham, Z. (2019). *Redefining Rural America*. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2019/07/17/471877/redefining-rural-america/>

² Semega, J., Kollar, M., Shrider, E.A., and Creamer, J.F. (2020). *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019* (P60-270). United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.html>

³ *Rural America at A Glance: 2018 Edition* (Economic Information Bulletin 200). United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90556/eib-200.pdf>

⁴ Richards, R. (2017). *Restoring Our Investment in America’s Forests: How the 2018 Farm Bill Can Create New Jobs for Rural America*. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2017/10/17/440816/restoring-investment-americas-forests/>

social communities that depend on them.⁵ Investment in recreation on public lands is also needed, with decaying recreation infrastructure and a time when more people than ever before make use of our public lands for recreation, health, and wellbeing.⁶

But in my limited time, I want to focus on one critical aspect of public lands management that a modern CCC can help address, namely, the rising risk of wildfires in the West

The Forest Service estimates that there are over 80 million acres of public land under their management in need of restoration and fire risk reduction.⁷ That's an area larger than the entire state of New Mexico. While the problem is due to a mix of past land use, fire suppression and government opposition to indigenous burning practices, as the climate warms, this threat will only increase.⁸

According to the Congressional Research Service, wildfires burned 10.1 million acres in 2020, the second-most acreage impacted in a year since 1960.⁹ To put that into perspective, 10 million acres is about 15,000 square miles, or larger than the state of Maryland or almost as large as Massachusetts and Connecticut combined.

This increase in the extent and severity of fire is supported not only by researchers and scientist, but also by the lived experience of our communities. I, myself live in Oregon and had friends and family directly impacted by the intense wildfire season of last summer. The wildfires put an estimated half million residents, or over 10 percent of the state's population under an evacuation warning, including homes in some of the suburbs of Portland.¹⁰ Fires in Southern Oregon were particularly destructive of homes, and like in Paradise, California and the Camp Fire, the events have led to persistent housing challenges.

Let me put this in sharp terms - what we are seeing is the phenomena of climate refugees in our own country. This is not a problem for tomorrow - this has already been happening.

I also want to make clear that this is not just a rural community or a western issue - this affects everyone through air pollution and associated health risks, the loss of forest ecosystems, impacts to our ability to recreate outdoors, and to the associated outdoor recreation industries, and through the positive feedback loop of additional release of carbon into the atmosphere. Furthermore, as with many disasters, wildfire

⁵ Radeloff V.C., et al. (2018). Rapid growth of the US wildland-urban interface raises wildfire risk. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA, 114:2946-2951.

⁶ Lago, L. (June 18th, 2019). Senate Energy and Natural Resources Hearing .

<https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/9D5D526C-2337-4002-9072-285BE733E072>

⁷ Dillon, M. (2019). How the Forest Service Restores Public Lands Now and in the Future. United States Department of Agriculture. <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2018/08/10/how-forest-service-restores-public-lands-now-and-future>

⁸ Hessburg, P, Agee, J.K., Franklin, J.F. (2005). Dry forests and wildland fires of the inland Northwest USA: Contrasting the landscape ecology of the pre-settlement and modern eras. Forest Ecology and Management 21: 117-139.

⁹ Hoover, K. and Hanson, L.A. (2021). *Wildfire Statistics* (IF10244). Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10244>

¹⁰ Bella, T., Iati, M., Knowles, H. (September 11, 2020). Oregon officials concerned wildfires could cause widespread death after a million acres burn. *The Washington Post*.

disproportionately impacts vulnerable communities - the homeless, those living in poverty, and those living with disability.

21st Century Conservation Corps is a Solution

So what can we do about the combined problems of rural poverty, rising fire risk, and undervalued public lands ?

While the topic is complicated and the details do matter, we know that we can reduce fire risk through community planning, home hardening, and fuels reduction treatments, including mechanical thinning, the recognition of, and support for indigenous knowledge and practices, and, critically, the use of prescribed and managed fire.¹¹ Likewise, we have solutions to the backlog of recreation and restoration work needed on public lands, but the scale of needed investment is massive and requires building out a workforce to match it.

We also know that resilient forests are a part of the solution to climate change, helping to store carbon, while providing important resources to both human and natural communities. And we know that investment in public lands restoration can help create jobs in all communities, but in rural communities in particular.

What is required is a sea change in our approach to the problem. We will need to see massive investment in existing programs used to address the problem, and in the the workforce needed to accomplish this work.

For too long we have thought about public forests in a commodity framework - logging trees produces revenue which can be used to accomplish restoration. While the value of wood products may help offset costs, we much change our thinking to realizing that restoration work on public lands is an investment in avoided costs.

The creation of the modern climate or conservation corps and passage of the 21st Century CCC Act would address these issues by providing a boost to the needed workforce to address these pressing issues. The 21st Century CCC would further create a job pipeline to further skilled work in conservation and fire risk reduction.

Research shows that lack of workforce capacity is one of the largest barriers to increasing prescribed fire.¹² Conservation corps and community-based organizations play a critical role in meeting this capacity challenge. Nonprofit organizations represent the largest increase in prescribed fire use over the past 10

¹¹ Kalies E.L., Kent L.L. 2016. Tamm Review: Are fuel treatments effective at achieving ecological and social objectives? A systematic review. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 375:84-95.

¹²Schultz, C., Huber-Stearns, H., Mccaffrey, S., Quirke, D., Ricco, G., & Moseley, C. (2018). Prescribed Fire Policy Barriers and Opportunities: A Diversity of Challenges and Strategies Across the West. Technical Report 86, Ecosystem Workforce Program.

years - a key ingredient in restoring fire-adapted ecosystems and reducing fire risk.¹³ And community nonprofits often play important bridging roles between public land management agencies and private landowners, connecting the latter to federal restoration programs and often performing restoration work on private lands. Community-based nonprofits also aid in the planning and implementation of cross-boundary burning, helping “carry the drip torch” onto willing private landowner’s ground.

Lack of funding for existing programs is also a critical barrier we need to overcome. The state of our forests presents a massive public health and safety problem that requires investment in solutions that are equal to the challenge. The Forest Service’s budget must be augmented by at least \$2 billion a year for the next ten years to invest in science-based wildfire and climate resilience.¹⁴ Increases will also be necessary for the Department of Interior agencies and private land management to increase resilience to fire, including in ecosystems adjacent to forests, such as rangelands

Corps jobs don’t just benefit rural communities. These jobs also help connect urban and rural communities, helping to serve as an antidote to the siloed and polarized conversations that have become all too common in our country. I, myself got to experience this years ago in my own conservation corp work by working on a crew that brought together youth from rural communities, inner-city Los Angeles, and everywhere in-between.

I also want to highlight other important elements of the 21st Century Conservation Corps Act. As important as conservation corps are, we also need investment in programs that help produce, long-term living wage jobs. The 21st Century Conservation Corps Act emphasis on use of stewardship end-result contracting, which allows for “best value” contracting, not just lowest bid. Stewardship Contracting can be used to consider local benefit, but also potentially to reward good labor practices including pay at or above prevailing wages.¹⁵ This is a particularly important tool to use as so much of the restoration and forestry workforce in not unionized.

The Act would also support the FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program to improve resiliency for communities impacted by wildfire, including home hardening. And related legislation, including the Prescribed Fire Act, Wildfire Emergency Act, and the Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act would further provide investment in prescribed fire training centers to create the mid-career, high-skilled workforce needed to continue fire risk reduction efforts. [Investment in community collaborative capacity to bring local solutions with community support...](#)

In closing, the 21st Century Conservation Corps Act is a vital contribution to making good on the promise of a Green New Deal and President Biden’s American Jobs Plan and will help begin to address poverty and unemployment while making significant contributions to improving public lands, reducing the risk of wildfires, and addressing the climate crisis.

¹³ Kolden, C.A. (2019). We’re Not Doing Enough Prescribed Fire in the Western United States to Mitigate Wildfire Risk. *Fire*, 2019, 2, 30. <https://www.mdpi.com/2571-6255/2/2/30>

¹⁴ Christiansen, V. (June 17th, 2021). Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Hearing. <https://www.energy.senate.gov/hearings/2021/6/full-committee-hearing-to-examine-the-president-s-fy-2022-budget-request-for-the-u-s-forest-service>

¹⁵ CT