

## Creating a Green Jobs Program to Put Pennsylvania Back to Work



Pennsylvania needs to get back to work and there is no easier way to do that than to invest in green jobs programs. The following recovery investments would take advantage of shovel-ready projects to modernize our green spaces, energy system, and water infrastructure. Each would also provide job opportunities in each of the Commonwealth's counties and to workers of various skill sets that reflect the diversity of unemployed, including high school graduates, college graduates, laborers and tradespeople, engineers, planners, and other technical experts.

### Create a Pennsylvania Conservation and Economic Recovery Corps

**Jobs Created or Protected:** *At least 15,000 in Year 1, depending on the salaries per worker and their length of employment.*

**Total Cost:** *Up to \$905,625,000<sup>1</sup>*

#### ***Framing Statement***

During the height of the Great Depression, the United States implemented a bold idea—provide the unemployed with job opportunities by building and maintaining environmental infrastructure like state park buildings, trails, tree plantings, forest roads, and flood barriers. For nine years, the Civilian Conservation Corps employed 3 million people, provided shelter and food, and required Corps members to send a portion of their earnings back home to their families, providing much-needed support to hard hit rural communities across America.

The program was so popular that even after its elimination because of World War II, states implemented scaled-down versions of the Corps to support youth job creation, conservation projects, and disaster response.<sup>2</sup> DCNR deploys an *Outdoor Corps* for 18-25 year-olds to conduct 10-month, paid employment to work on projects on state park and forest land.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) introduced the *21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps Act* to reestablish a national Corps to provide employment completing conservation and restoration projects.

“WHILE THE IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE IS ADDRESSING THE STATE’S HISTORIC UNEMPLOYMENT, THE LONG-TERM NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS OF PENNSYLVANIA ARE ALSO IMMENSE...”

While the United States is a much different place than in 1933, an equally bold idea is needed to provide Pennsylvania’s unemployed with job opportunities during the COVID-fueled recession. That idea is to create a modern-day *Pennsylvania Conservation and Economic Recovery Corps* (CERC) to provide guaranteed work and family-sustaining wages for conservation projects around the Commonwealth. This would not be an expansion of the DCNR Outdoor Corps, but rather a jobs program to leverage the skills of the unemployed to help rebuild and maintain Pennsylvania’s natural infrastructure.

While the immediate challenge is addressing the state’s historic unemployment, the long-term natural infrastructure needs of Pennsylvania are also immense and provide a win-win opportunity. The Pennsylvania Parks & Forests Foundation calculated that the state park and forest infrastructure and maintenance needs totaled \$1 billion (PPFF, 2018). Pennsylvania’s *Phase 3 Watershed Implementation Plan* for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed estimates that the cost of pollution reduction projects in the Susquehanna River and Potomac watersheds, such as for forest buffers, soil health, and agricultural projects, is \$521 million per year, of which a deficit of \$324 million per year remains (PADEP, August 2019, p. 11). Governor Wolf’s *Restore Pennsylvania* plan identified billions of dollars-worth of projects to build green stormwater infrastructure, flood control, brownfield cleanup, and other conservation projects (Wolf, 2019).

Put simply, there are billions of dollars-worth of natural infrastructure projects backlogged throughout the Commonwealth. CERC could help put a major dent in this backlog, leveraging existing program funding at state agencies, federal project and stimulus funds, as well as new state investments to put people back to work rebuilding Pennsylvania.

CERC should also support employment for high school students, recent college graduates, unskilled workers, workers in communities of color, and workers interested in the opportunity to learn new skills that will be transferable to future jobs. There is currently no clear trajectory in these populations and communities to develop skills and enter or re-enter the workforce. This plan would provide such a trajectory and likely cause the current lack of skilled workers that many Pennsylvania employers report to shrink (Hoffman, 2018; PA State System of Higher Education, 2016). For example, millennials who entered the workforce during the Great Recession have had, on average, lower wages (adjusted for inflation) and less accumulated net wealth than other generations (Kurz et al., 2018). CERC could help prevent this from happening to the current generation entering the workforce during the economic fallout from COVID-19 as well as help address the significant racial inequality in the state economy.

### Recommended Policy Intervention

- Create the CERC as a new, independent commission that is jointly chaired by leadership from relevant environmental, conservation, agriculture, and economic agencies to quickly develop hiring guidelines, prioritize projects, leverage existing state project management expertise to ensure projects are efficiently managed, and ensure the program engages on projects throughout the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup>
- Set a goal of hiring 15,000 unemployed Pennsylvanians in the first 12 months.<sup>5</sup> Workers would be hired on 6-month terms, which would be extended based on the needs of the workers and projects.<sup>6</sup> This would allow workers flexibility to find permanent full-time work elsewhere, while also providing a steady workforce for project development.





- Significantly expand maintenance, construction and installation of conservation and pollution reduction projects, including the following:
  - State park and forest maintenance
  - Habitat and wildlife management
  - Green stormwater infrastructure
  - Stream buffers
  - Invasive species removal
  - Main Street beautification projects
  - Implement agriculture best-management projects
  - Tree plantings and other conservation activities
  - Upgrade agency IT infrastructure
- Supplementary to the support described for small farmers above, a portion of CERC hires should be used to assist small Pennsylvania farmers if shortages in skilled labor occur. These hires should also be used to help farmers with technical assistance or with administrative burdens that often prevent them from completing best management plans or accessing available loans, grants, or tax credits.
- CERC should also target employment opportunities for recent graduates, workers without a degree, high school students, and workers in communities of color that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- Wages should be able to support a family, so either prevailing wages for the area or at least \$24/hour, which would provide the equivalent of a \$50,000/year salary.
- Workers should also be provided health insurance, paid sick leave, and paid time off. Additional benefits, such as accreditation, community college credits, or other technical training could also be offered alongside the program so that long-term skills are provided. For example, flexibility could be provided that allows CERC hires to be provided access to discounted or free education at a regional state school or community college rather than getting paid a full salary.
- Require all Pennsylvania counties to submit lists of CERC-based job opportunities, such as organizing projects by DCNR's nature-based regions plus heritage areas, urban communities, and environmental justice areas, so that potential workers have access to projects close to their homes and the program is well integrated with county officials.

## Endnotes

---

- 1 Cost estimate is based on the following calculation: \$50,000/year salary plus 15 percent for benefits, or \$57,500 total. For 15,000 new hires, this equals \$862,500,000. Administration costs are assumed to be 5 percent or \$28,750,000 for a total estimated cost of \$905,625,000. It's assumed this is a maximum cost as the state will provide different salary grades for projects and this estimate assumes workers stay for a full year.
- 2 Many states have programs similar to the core ethic of the conservation corps, including the California Conservation Corps, Texas Conservation Corps, Montana Conservation Corps, and the Washington Conservation Corps. Many programs are certified through AmeriCorps.
- 3 Information about the Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps can be found here: <https://www.dcnr.pa.gov/outdoorcorps/Pages/default.aspx>
- 4 Leadership from the following agencies would be important to consider: Department of Environmental Protection, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Department of Community and Economic Development, Department of Agriculture, Game Commission, Fish & Boat Commission, and the County Conservation Districts.
- 5 CERC should consider diverse skill sets and job opportunities so that employment opportunities are available for laborers, engineers, architects, recent graduates, unskilled workers, and other trades.
- 6 This would be a 156 percent increase in workforce for environmental protection, agriculture preservation, and general conservation projects. According to the Pennsylvania Office of Administration Workforce Statistics Dashboard for 2020, DCNR's full-time workforce totals 1,245, plus an additional 1,300 seasonal employees during peak park and forest visitor season. DEP's full-time workforce totals 2,326. The Department of Agriculture totals 541, the Game Commission employs 642 workers, and the Fish & Boat Commission employs 348 workers. The total, existing workforce for the main environmental and conservation state agencies is 6,402.



## PennFuture

610 North Third Street  
Harrisburg, PA 17101  
717-214-7920

**[www.pennfuture.org](http://www.pennfuture.org)**

**Contact PennFuture:**  
[info@pennfuture.org](mailto:info@pennfuture.org)

PennFuture is leading the transition to a clean energy economy in Pennsylvania and beyond. We are protecting our air, water and land, and empowering citizens to build sustainable communities for future generations.

Citizens for Pennsylvania's Future—PennFuture—was created in 1998 as a statewide environmental advocacy organization. Since our founding, we have achieved significant legal and policy victories that reduce pollution and protect the environment. We have provided millions of dollars in pro bono legal services while setting critical precedents and enforcing environmental laws across the commonwealth.

Our team is working daily to protect public health, restore and protect natural resources, and move Pennsylvania toward a clean energy future. With offices in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Erie, and Mt. Pocono, our team litigates cases before regulatory bodies and in local, state, and federal courts; advances legislative action on a state and federal level; provides public education; assists citizens in public advocacy; engages with grassroots citizenry to support environmental causes; and engages with communities to increase participation in democratic processes.