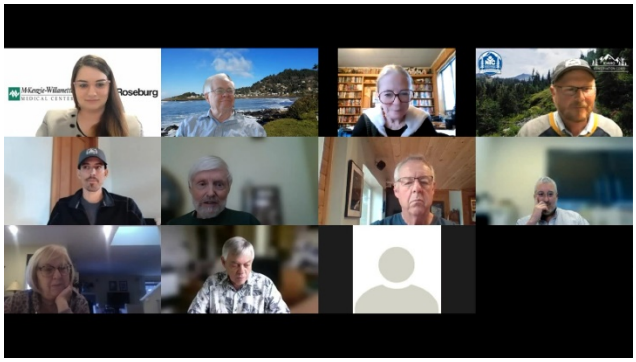
The Northwest Youth Corps, which has served teenagers and young adults in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho since 1984, has embarked on a major new initiative with the Wildfire Protection Corps program. The new initiative, developed in response to the Holiday Farm fire, focuses on both post-fire restoration and cleanup, including erosion control and prevention efforts involving removal of invasive species and fuel reduction.

Jeff Parker, Executive Director of the Youth Corps, and Kai Chotard, manager of the new Wildfire Protection Corps, described the new initiative as well as the Corps long history of working with teens and young adults to help them learn, grow, and experience success through conservation service. The Wildfire Protection Program was strongly supported by the Legislative Assembly in the 2020 session when it created the Oregon Conservation Corps, which provided for funding of efforts like those of the Youth Corps.

The Wildfire program is one element of an extensive set of initiatives the youth Corps uses to "educate, build community, develop leadership skills and create a sense of empowerment," according to Mr. Parker.



There are three program models that the Youth Corps uses. For teens 15 -18 there are two variations of a five-to-six-week program. The first is youth camping, where teenagers are placed in programs camping in the forest and working on conservation projects. The teens get a full outdoor experience while at the same time earning a wage. The second variation is a similar program that does not include the camping element. This is designed for teens who have other responsibilities, like family matters, and cannot spend extended periods away from home.

The second model is designed for young adults ranging from 19-26. The format of the program is similar, but of longer duration (typically eight to 12 weeks, Not only do the participants work in the conservation area in ways allowing them to test career opportunities, but also they earn AmeriCorps awards which enable them to repay student loans or reduce tuition costs for education.

Within these two models, the Youth Corps also has designed some programs to focus on diversity and inclusion issues. Some of these are gender specific, like a women's fire crew in Idaho, others focus on important social issues – a rainbow crew designed to address issues affecting LBGTQ youth, specific offerings with a tribal focus or a crew of deaf individuals. Mr. Parker noted that although they had some initial trepidation with a crew of deaf individuals, "they turned out to be the safest crew in the forest."

The third model is a professional internship program which allows participants a six to 12 month paid internship with an agency. A particular advantage to the participants in this model is that it offers them enhanced opportunities to connect with full-time employment opportunities in the agencies where they serve.

In addition to these programs, the Youth Corps also runs a compete charter high school serving students in the eight through twelfth grade. The school operated in conjunction with Eugene School District 4J,

has 50 students at present and offers full academic program along with CTE programs in outdoor recreation and resource management. More information on the school can be found at https://twinriverscharter.org/

Across all its programs the Youth Corps focuses on basic job skills, adding in opportunities to earn credentials in specific areas when working with young adults. “Hopefully, we give the participants the steppingstones they need for success,” Mr. Parke said. He added that for young adults working on crews funded under the Public Lands Act, individuals can earn preferential hiring status once they have completed 960 hours. In some cases, there are even direct hiring opportunities.

Diving into the details of the Wildfire Protection Corps, Mr. Chotard said that it grew out of the desire of the Youth Corps to help in the face of the holiday Farm fire. Once funding could be secured by donations from some of their over 200 private partners, they dispatched crews to deal with post-fire work debris removal and riparian area restoration. Now the project has taken on a permanent status developing restoration and protection efforts. The Corps now has agreements with landowners to go onto their property and reduce fuels, remove invasive species, and control erosion. One specific project in erosion control is the construction of large jute wattles that can be placed in burned areas to prevent further erosion.

The Youth corps website – https://www.nwyouthcorps.org -- is the portal to apply for opportunities to join a crew. Currently they are recruiting for young adult positions; opportunities for teenagers will open on April 1. There are very few restrictions or limitations. Anyone 15 or over can apply. Applicants must be able to lift a reasonable amount of weight, to hike and be on their feet, and pass both a criminal background check and a COVID check. “Having a spark and desire, is the most important qualification,” Mr. Parker said, “I have never run across a participant who couldn’t, although occasionally we have some who wouldn’t.” “We know that some people don’t have everything in their life already,” he added. “We want them to come. We will help them develop the skills they need.”

When asked how the Youth Corps deals with outside issues – problems of home life and the like, Mr. Parker said that while in the past they had tried to deal with some of those issues, they now look to their social services partners who can provide wraparound services to support participants in the program.

The Youth Corps now serves over 1,000 participants in its three-state area. Mr. Parker said they could probably expand, by as much as 15 percent, if they could get funding for their private partners to cover many of the indirect costs associated with running programs of this nature.