

# Narratives

## Executive Summary

Each year of the three-year grant cycle, 53 AmeriCorps members will lead 270 high school youth and more than 1,000 volunteers to restore natural habitat on public lands, improve water quality and increase access to outdoor recreation in Minnesota. Annually, at least 3,000 acres of vital habitat will be restored, 250 miles of trails created or improved, 2,000 people will receive environmental education, and 39,000 hours of service completed by youth. This project will focus on the CNCS Environmental Stewardship area. Each year, the CNCS investment of \$478,981 will be matched with \$317,467. The program restores vital natural resources and changes the lives of young people.

## Rationale and Approach

### NEED: RESTORING PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS

Minnesota, the Land of 10,000 Lakes, is also home to the headwaters of the Mississippi, the world's fourth-longest river. Lake Superior, the world's largest freshwater lake, defines our northern climate and culture. Both of these bodies of water provide drinking water for much of Minnesota. Yet throughout the state, we have lost natural habitats that are essential to a healthy ecosystem and maintaining water quality. Prairie, oak savanna, wetlands and forests are being depleted by residential development, agriculture and the spread of non-native invasive species. For example, before European settlement, native prairie covered more than 18 million acres in Minnesota, but less than 1% remains today. (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website)

Natural habitats are critical for preventing soil erosion and protecting water quality. For example, native prairie plant root systems reach 5-15 feet in depth, allowing excess water and nutrients to be absorbed and drawn deep into the soil. In contrast, shallow-rooted invasive plants allow rainfall runoff similar to concrete, washing soil and chemical pollutants into nearby waterways. The loss of native habitat is about more than losing scenic beauty; it is directly linked to decreased water quality that people use every day for drinking, washing and recreation. About 40% of state streams and lakes fail to meet water quality standards established by the federal Clean Water Act. In 2012, more than 500 water bodies were added to the federal impaired listing and only 13 were delisted. (2012 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency)

### NEED: CONNECT THE PUBLIC TO THE OUTDOORS THROUGH RECREATION ACCESS

Natural resource management agencies are sounding the alarm that disengaged citizens compound the threat to the environment. "At the state and national level, outdoor recreation participation is declining," states the Minnesota Parks strategic plan (June 2011). "After some 50 years

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of growth after World War II, nature-based recreation" has declined since the 1990s, and "the future of outdoor recreation and the protection of natural and cultural resources may be in jeopardy."

From an economic perspective, outdoor tourism is a major Minnesota industry, particularly in rural areas. According to a 2002 Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) study, state parks generate \$287 million in annual business sales, with \$47 million coming from outside the state. The U.S. Department of the Interior estimates that fishing, hunting and wildlife watching generate \$4.3 billion in annual Minnesota retail sales. Losing quality in outdoor recreation and people's connection to the environment have serious potential impacts on the state economy.

It is critically important to improve parks, trails and waterways, the gateways to outdoor recreation, to increase their use and spark environmental interest. When a resident develops a meaningful connection with an outdoor place, it leads to behaviors that protect the environment and promote a healthy way of life. At the end of the day, environmental issues are people issues.

### NEED: GREEN-COLLAR JOB TRAINING FOR YOUTH

While Minnesota is known for its high quality of life, with unemployment typically below federal levels, it has the second-worst unemployment racial disparity in the nation. (2011 Economic Policy Institute) In 2009-2010, African Americans were 3.3 times more likely to be unemployed in the Twin Cities than Caucasians. Particularly vulnerable are youth of color. The Bureau of Labor Statistics October 2012 report showed unemployment for youth, ages 16-19, at 23.5%, and for African American youth, it was 39.6%.

Expanding green job opportunities could provide the first step on a career pathway for youth. In Minnesota, the Department of Employment and Economic Development found that green-collar job vacancies grew at a rate equal to other fields from October 2009 to June 2011. However, 54% of green vacancies were new positions rather than replacements, indicating the emergence of a green economy with higher-quality jobs, higher wages and more stability than vacancies overall. Green jobs are defined by DEED as directly related to green products or services in fields such as natural resource conservation and environmental cleanup, restoration, research, education and regulation.

Environmental science education and hands-on work experience in green job fields can lead to meaningful careers. The Brookings Institute found that the "clean economy," consisting of environmentally-friendly products and services, grew by 8.3% from 2008 to 2009 - almost double the overall economy's growth during the same period. In addition, as baby boomers retire, the Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources will need to replace as much as 50% of its workforce. AmeriCorps members' service in providing job training and education for youth is an investment in meeting state

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job demands a decade from now.

### **AMERICORPS MEMBERS AS HIGHLY EFFECTIVE MEANS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS**

It is clear there is work to be done in protecting Minnesota's environment and improving parks and trails. At the same time, many people are in need of jobs. The Conservation Corps will protect and restore the environment by providing on-the-job training to those who need work the most: low-income youth of color. Under the leadership of AmeriCorps members, youth are not simply the recipients of service, but rather provide meaningful service to their communities.

Conservation Corps Minnesota will utilize 40 AmeriCorps MSY (Member Service Year, or full time equivalents) each year to lead diverse youth in developing job skills as they build social capital in the community through a restored environment. AmeriCorps members provide greater skill levels in completing environmental restoration projects and training youth than other volunteers. Also, the cost-effective approach and ability to leverage multiple funding sources allows service to occur that would not otherwise be possible or at of the same level without AmeriCorps members. Through such projects, members educate youth and community members on the connections between healthy natural habitat and the clean water that comes out of their faucets, between outdoor recreation and improved quality of life, and between job training today and careers for tomorrow.

A total of 53 members will complete service in the following areas:

-22 full-time (FT) members will lead job training and service-learning projects for youth after school, complete high-skill service projects and lead volunteers.

-26 half-time (HT) members will lead job training and service-learning projects for youth during the summer and lead volunteers.

-5 FT members will be placed with partnering organizations to complete high-skill service projects and educate community members about the environment.

### **MEMBERS' ROLE IN GREEN JOB TRAINING FOR YOUTH**

Each year, 22 FT AmeriCorps members will operate a Twin Cities afterschool program for 120 youth. Members will provide general job skills coaching and specific green job training as they lead diverse youth in community service and mentor them to build practical skills, connect to the natural environment, and prepare for meaningful careers. All participants, ages 15-18, will be from low-income households, and 90% will be youth of color with equal numbers of males and females. All youth apply to the Corps and are selected by staff. Members will lead youth participants in 12 hours of service-learning activities per week, in teams with six youth participants and two members each based at recreation centers in low-income areas of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. While earning a paycheck

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equal to the federal minimum wage, youth participants will gain basic job skills such as punctuality, effective communication, teamwork and safety. About 75% of program time will be spent revitalizing local neighborhoods and public spaces through unique projects such as installing rain gardens, removing invasive species, building trails, maintaining riverfronts, and beautifying parks. Youth learn green job skills through hands-on completion of the projects. During the remaining 25% of program time, members will utilize environmental science curriculum that closely matches Minnesota academic standards, and job-related topics including resume writing, interviewing and financial management.

When not directly engaged with youth during the program year, AmeriCorps members will complete hands-on service projects to accomplish needed natural resource restoration and build their skill level for leading youth service projects. Between school semesters, the full-time members will complete restoration projects that require higher-level technical skills such as operating power tools.

Each year, 26 HT members, based at Saint Croix State Park in rural eastern Minnesota, will lead a residential summer program for 150 youth, in teams with six youth participants and two members. Youth ages 15 to 18, from diverse backgrounds: 40% from minority backgrounds, equal numbers of males and females, equal urban and rural participants, 15-20% of whom are deaf or hard of hearing, and 70% from low-income households. All youth apply to the Conservation Corps and are selected by staff for one of two sessions, each four weeks in length. AmeriCorps-led service projects will improve water quality, preserve biodiversity and enhance outdoor recreation; 95% will be performed in rural communities. The Corps will recruit about six AmeriCorps members who are sign language interpreters or deaf to lead crews that include youth who are deaf. The Corps has long been a leader in involving AmeriCorps members and youth who are deaf in service. In 2008, Conservation Corps Minnesota worked with AmeriCorps programs in Wisconsin and Utah to develop the "Inclusive Crew Toolkit" for other organizations to use in designing programs that include people with disabilities.

During the program, youth interact with environmental professionals and community leaders, gaining exposure to a variety of careers. Members organize informational interviews with project hosts who share their backgrounds and career paths as part of the project's introduction. Youth engage with a career panel where and learn from professionals in a variety of careers such as natural resources, education, science, technology, communications and other fields. In addition, AmeriCorps members present online resources to help youth explore green careers.

### **MEMBERS' ROLE IN RESTORING PUBLIC LAND AND WATER**

Members will restore public land and promote clean water by leading youth and volunteers to

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install raingardens and buffers to reduce storm water runoff, restore native prairies and woodlands, stabilize shorelines and remove invasive plants. Fifty-three members will lead youth and volunteers, in partnership with government agencies and nonprofits, to improve 3,000 acres of native habitat throughout Minnesota, such as Theodore Wirth Park in Minneapolis, Tettegouche State Park on Lake Superior's North Shore, and Tatanka Bluffs on the Minnesota River in western Minnesota.

Members and youth will plant buffers and rain gardens, stabilize slopes and install other water and soil retention practices adjacent to rivers, lakes and wetlands that trap sediment, nutrients and bacteria to prevent runoff pollution. In fragile wetlands, members will remove reed canary grass, hybrid cattail, purple loosestrife, garlic mustard and other non-native invasive plants that degrade wetland quality and biological diversity. Members will plant native tall grass perennials with long, deep roots that capture pollutants and keep soils intact during heavy rains.

### **MEMBERS' ROLE IN IMPROVING PUBLIC PARKS, TRAILS AND WATERWAYS**

Members will preserve and enhance vital public access to the outdoors. Fifty-three members will engage youth and volunteers in environmental stewardship of public trails and parks. Members will remove barriers to outdoor recreation by building and improving 250 miles of hiking, skiing, biking, walking and boating trails. By enhancing outdoor recreational opportunities that are free or affordable, safe and accessible to all backgrounds, interests and abilities, members' service will increase participation, connection and appreciation for the environment and improve physical health.

Five FT members will implement an aggressive community outreach strategy to engage residents in environmental education and volunteer opportunities. Members will recruit, train and supply equipment to volunteers for the Minnesota Adopt-a-River program, which annually engages 4,000 volunteers in cleaning up rivers statewide. They will help protect wild and scenic river corridors by using GPS/GIS technology to gather land-use data, develop plans to protect scenic river easements and educate the community on the importance of protecting waterways. Members will also lead environmental education field trips for 1,500 elementary schoolchildren as part of the Minnesota Big River Journey curriculum developed by the National Park Service.

### **EVIDENCE-INFORMED**

Minnesotans face the challenges of protecting and restoring the environment, providing better access to outdoor recreation, and overcoming enormous racial disparity in unemployment. The "Needs" section of this application provides documentation for these community problems.

Conservation Corps Minnesota's program model and interventions are time-tested and evidence-informed by recent research, enabling it to meet modern day challenges. AmeriCorps members are

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key in transforming youth from recipients of service into providers of service in their community. Together, AmeriCorps members and youth will contribute over 104,000 hours of service; a full 50% more than AmeriCorps members could do alone.

The theory of change states that youth empowered to provide meaningful service to their community can simultaneously accomplish work that needs to get done and develop the skills necessary for future success. In January 2013, this theory was backed by leaders of eight federal agencies upon taking the first steps to implement a "21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) - a national collaborative effort to put America's youth and returning veterans to work protecting, restoring and enhancing America's great outdoors." (Department of the Interior) Nancy Sutley, Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, stated: "The 21st Century Conservation Service Corps will help prepare the leaders of the future by providing youth with valuable opportunities for recreation, career development and service to their community and their Nation."

Youth afterschool and summer programs are based on evidence that extended learning leads to future success. The National Youth Leadership Council's "Good to Great 2009" research report confirms that service learning positively affects academics, civic engagement and healthy behaviors. Bridging knowledge gaps and reducing disparities is particularly important as diverse youth from low-income households seek further education and employment. A March 2009 American Youth Policy Forum report states further evidence that older student participation in extended learning opportunities "is one way to better ensure that all students are provided with the support they need to achieve academic and career success and develop into healthy, self-sufficient adults." (Benefits of Expanded Learning Opportunities for Older Youth) Quality out-of-school programs, which provide students with work-readiness skills and innovative support systems, help them master the multi-dimensional abilities needed in the 21st century. (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2012)

Key elements of youth development, as identified by the Search Institute (2007), are present in the Corps' program design including: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Furthermore, staff ensure that these program elements occur at the point of service between AmeriCorps members and youth by implementing the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), a research-validated and field-tested evaluation tool designed developed by the Weikert Institute. Conservation Corps designed the program with an evidence-informed approach and ensures implementation at the point of service through evaluation.

The effectiveness of AmeriCorps members' intervention in youth development and training is also evidenced by knowledge and job skills assessments. Over the past three years, assessments have

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shown 92% of youth developed confidence in their leadership ability, 92% improved job readiness, and 94% increased environmental knowledge.

Natural resource professionals, serving as on-site supervisors, ensure project implementation meets industry standards and conservation best practices. Intervention strategies for distressed habitats, degraded trails and polluted water bodies are selected by partnering agencies in accordance with their larger site management plan. Members are introduced to best practices at the beginning of their term and provided training for specific projects from the partnering agency. These evidence-informed approaches are documented by leading authorities on conservation, including the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service and Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources.

Project accomplishment reports measure acres of land restored and miles of trail maintained/built. Community impact is measured by post-project host surveys on the effectiveness of restoration techniques and increased land use. Over the past three years, the Conservation Corps has completed 1,009 miles of trail improvement and 11,201 acres of habitat restoration; 100% of project hosts indicated positive community impacts as a result of the projects.

Conservation Corps Minnesota's theory of change is also supported by internal qualitative evidence. When asked about the value of her experience, a 17-year-old Saint Paul participant named La said, "Being a part of the Conservation Corps means having a diverse and different family where we all had the same goal: to better the environment. It is a program that fills my heart with warmth because of the thank you's from our sponsors and the feeling after a hard day's work. I feel as if I have been placed in the correct place in this world and I owe this to you."

### MEASURABLE COMMUNITY IMPACT

Member, youth and volunteer activities will have a direct positive impact on communities. Through invasive species removal and native seeding, members are restoring native habitat for future generations to enjoy. By planting rain gardens and controlling shoreline erosion on impaired waters, they are improving communities' water quality for drinking, fishing and swimming. By building/maintaining trails and natural recreation areas, they are increasing community access to hiking, fishing, camping and boating. And by engaging community groups in education, restoration, river cleanups and trail improvement, members encourage environmental stewards in local areas.

### ANTICIPATED CHANGE - PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Three-year grant cycle outputs: 159 members will lead 810 youth to complete 313,200 hours of hands-on training to improve 9,000 acres of vital habitat and 750 miles of waterways and trails, and educate 6,000 individuals about environmentally-conscious practices. These outputs reflect only a

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portion of members' impact. In a larger sense, members are protecting the Upper Mississippi Watershed that supports 30 million Americans, making state parks and trails accessible to 5 million Minnesota residents, and fostering a statewide conservation ethic.

Data to quantify service impact is collected through daily field reports, partner organization surveys solicited at each project's end, and 21st century skills assessments for youth. Outputs are submitted by members bi-monthly. Staff verify project accomplishment reports for accuracy and enter the data in an online database with a proven track record for collecting and reporting outcomes based on program outputs. Staff use this information to report accomplishments on an annual basis. The proposed performance measures were determined by analyzing past data, surveying stakeholders about future needs, and studying trends in youth development and conservation.

### PAST PERFORMANCE

Conservation Corps Minnesota has a strong record of meeting performance measures. Data for year two of its current three-year grant, the latest for which complete data is available, shows:

Job Training for Economically Disadvantaged Individuals: 161 economically disadvantaged youth participants received job training, with 132 prepared to seek and apply for their next job, exceeding targets of 100 youth trained and 85 prepared.

Public Land Habitat Restoration: 8,427 acres of parks and public lands improved, and 86% of partners indicated increased capacity to manage the land as a result; exceeding performance measure targets of 2,000 acres and 85%. The warm year resulted in more acres of prescribed burning for wildfire prevention and habitat restoration, which significantly increased the output.

Trail and River Improvement: 319 miles of trails and rivers were improved, and 47% of partners indicated increased management capacity as a result. This year's demand for acres of public land restoration affected the Corps' ability to meet the goal of 400 miles of trails and rivers improved. Trail improvements often require on-going support, which is the likely reason for lower than anticipated results (85%) in future capacity. However, 100% of partners agreed that the projects had improved trails and 92% predicted greater use.

Home Energy Conservation: 1,225 low-income homes were retrofitted to improve energy efficiency by 13,108 MMBTU, exceeding targets of 1,000 low-income homes and 9,070 MMBTU. This aspect of the program is not continuing, because the partnering organization has become sustainable beyond the support of AmeriCorps members.

### MEMBER RECRUITMENT

Conservation Corps staff implement a comprehensive recruitment plan intended to attract

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members who reflect the social and cultural diversity of the communities served. Announcements through websites, radio and newspapers include media that serve Native American, Somali, Hispanic, Hmong, African American, Deaf and other diverse communities. Staff attend job fairs and community events and give presentations at schools and churches. American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and individuals who are deaf are recruited from colleges and universities with corresponding departments, including the College of Saint Catherine and Saint Paul College. Staff also reach out to underserved audiences through personal connections with community members. As a result, 438 people applied for 81 member positions last year.

Members must meet all eligibility requirements: at least 18 years old, U.S. resident and acceptable criminal and national sex offender public-registry background checks. All must complete an application and interview. Members are selected based on service experience, commitment to completing a full term, and desire to engage in youth development and conservation service, develop leadership skills and establish cross-cultural connections. ASL knowledge is preferred for certain positions, and applicants must participate in a video relay call to assess their interpreting ability.

With the Corps' targeted recruitment plan, most members are from Minnesota and from the community they serve. Recruitment through online postings and organizational partnerships focus on outreach to diverse communities. As a result, of the 81 members enrolled during the last program year, 14 were from underrepresented populations, including communities of color and individuals who were deaf or hard of hearing. Also, of the 81 members, 40 were female and 41 were male. A number of youth participants return as AmeriCorps members and recruitment data for the upcoming program year shows an increase in underrepresented individuals applying for AmeriCorps service.

### MEMBER TRAINING

Members begin service terms with a weeklong orientation that highlights national service, AmeriCorps benefits and policies, and code of conduct that includes prohibited service activities with a "check for understanding" at session end. Personal development training in team dynamics, communication and diversity prepares members for service in a team setting. Natural resource professionals lead introductory sessions on conservation ethics, sustainable trail maintenance, forest and prairie restoration, and best management practices to improve water quality. First aid and CPR are required for all members and provided by either the American Red Cross or Aerie Backcountry Medicine. Corps trainings are continually assessed and improved through post-training evaluations.

Member training continues in communities where members will serve, with two weeks dedicated to advanced skills training, including chainsaw and hand tool use, safety, trail building

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techniques, and plant and tree identification. Twenty-seven members will be serving in the Twin Cities area of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Twenty-six members will be based in central Minnesota and travel to rural service project locations for two weeks at a time. Members earn certifications such as defensive driving, CPR and first aid, a Red Card for wildfire suppression and prescribed burning, and a pesticide applicator's license.

Later in the first month of their service term, training on leadership, cultural competency, volunteer management, facilitation techniques and conflict resolution prepares members to lead youth in a service-learning and job-preparedness program. Staff facilitate trainings or bring in outside presenters as needed in order to provide members with quality learning opportunities. ASL interpreters meet with professional interpreters for observations and feedback.

As they begin their service term, members receive on-site orientations for each project and location from professional staff of partnering organizations. As needed, the professional staff provide additional project-specific training for environmental interventions.

Members also come together on three scheduled "All Corps Days" for service and training sessions designed by a member cohort from various service sites. Corps staff provide direction and guidance for these activities. At the program midpoint, members attend environmental, youth development and civic leadership workshops presented by professionals in the respective fields. Throughout the term, Corps staff and project hosts facilitate discussions about youth development, water and land management, and conservation best practices.

Near program end, AmeriCorps members engage in "life after AmeriCorps" training on job seeking, resume writing and interviewing, and they job shadow a mentor for a day. Program alumni serve on a panel to provide guidance on applying for jobs, college or graduate school. A member who does not have a high school diploma is required to sign a GED contract, and staff will help identify course requirements and a timeline to help the member obtain a GED by term end.

### MEMBER SUPERVISION

AmeriCorps members complete service projects for various community partners throughout their terms, overseen by program staff whose responsibilities include program planning, service project coordination, member supervision, training and support. This comfortable, supportive environment leads to increased member satisfaction and retention. Member satisfaction and support is assessed throughout the term during weekly check-ins with program staff. Staff visit members at service sites monthly to assess member experience, skill development and safety.

While Conservation Corps staff serve as primary supervisors for all members, project partners

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serve as on-site supervisors, providing site orientations, project-specific skill training and equipment assistance. Staff select partners that have extensive experience in public land management and understand the ethos of national service. On-site supervisors are experienced professionals who utilize the skills and energy of AmeriCorps members and youth to implement site-specific restoration plans. Corps staff provide orientation and training to on-site supervisors prior to member arrival to review project logistics, site supervisor responsibilities, member policies including prohibited service activities, communication structures and safety protocols. Typically, on-site supervisors are responsible for two to four members. Staff visit projects to ensure policy compliance and a quality member experience. Follow-up meetings celebrate successes, address challenges and provide training.

### **MEMBER EXPERIENCE**

Members make an immediate impact in the community by training youth, leading volunteers, and completing hands-on environmental projects. During orientation, weekly meetings, All Corps Days, a mid-year retreat and year-end event, members reflect on their service and its impact on youth, the natural environment and the broader community. AmeriCorps members' dedication to service is enhanced through interaction with professionals in the field and other national service members. Members develop lifelong community leadership skills, a commitment to civic engagement, and a passion for service. The experience is life changing and prepares members for future success.

Members serve in local communities with various partnering sites. Therefore, during orientation, members participate in public relations training so that they can accurately convey the role of the Conservation Corps as an AmeriCorps program and their role as an AmeriCorps member as it relates to other national service positions across the country. Wherever members serve, the AmeriCorps logo is prominently displayed on program clothing, vehicles, print materials and signs.

Members connect with other national service participants through service and training opportunities including National AmeriCorps Week and the InterCorps Council of Minnesota. National AmeriCorps week has included Conservation Corps members as leaders for environmental restoration projects that incorporated members from other AmeriCorps programs. The Conservation Corps encourages members to apply for the InterCorps Council of Minnesota, which is a peer-led organization of AmeriCorps members, representing State, National and VISTA programs. The vision of the InterCorps Council is to promote engagement, communication, collaboration and education to empower the AmeriCorps community in Minnesota.

### **VOLUNTEER GENERATION**

AmeriCorps members and youth participants are trained in volunteer management at the

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beginning of their terms; they then lead volunteers on projects throughout the year, primarily on Saturdays. Local cities, parks departments and community groups have the ability to reach lots of potential volunteers through email blasts, websites and existing networks, but they often have limited capacity to manage large volunteer groups on-site. AmeriCorps members and youth are able to fill a critical role in managing volunteers by providing instruction and project supervision. For example, last spring in Saint Paul, members and youth managed more than 1,000 volunteers involved with the city's annual Spring Park Cleanup.

In addition to leading volunteers recruited by partnering organizations, members and youth recruit volunteers for Corps-designed projects. During each academic semester, AmeriCorps members guide youth as they plan and direct a service project of their choosing. The guidelines for the project are simply that it must educate, serve and involve local residents; the rest is up to the youth to collectively design. AmeriCorps members facilitate the youth participants' decision-making process, aid in their learning and support them in their efforts to execute the project and recruit volunteers.

Program staff must approve all volunteer recruitment and management completed by AmeriCorps members before the activity begins. Staff ensure that volunteers do not participate in any prohibited activities and, during registration, will inform volunteers of allowable activities.

### ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTITY

The Conservation Corps places great value on carrying forward a legacy of service in both action and promotion. The AmeriCorps logo is prominent on the Conservation Corps website, all branded materials, member service shirts, vehicles, at permanent service sites and office locations, and materials disseminated to members.

All service site contracts include a request that the partnering agency provide at least one publicity promotion via print, broadcast or electronic media. Media background sheets provided to the partnering agency and media outlet clearly identify Conservation Corps Minnesota as an AmeriCorps program and provides information about the size, scope and impact of national service.

## Organizational Capability

### ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING

The Conservation Corps' mission is summed up in its motto: "Resources restored. Lives changed." The Corps traces its roots to the 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps, which provided natural resource jobs to unemployed young people during the Great Depression. When federal support for conservation corps ended in 1981, the Minnesota Conservation Corps was created by the Minnesota Legislature to offer youth and young adult programs through the Department of Natural Resources,

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and the program transitioned to a nonprofit organization in 2003. In 2010, the organization changed its legal name to Conservation Corps, dba Conservation Corps Minnesota, to better reflect its service after launching a smaller model of its young adult program, Conservation Corps Iowa, in Ames.

The Corps is overseen by a 13-member board of directors responsible for the overall vision, well-being, and compliance of the organization. The board oversees an executive director who leads 26 full-time and 1 part-time staff. The five-member staff management team, including the executive, finance, development and two program directors, implements and monitors organizational policies and strategic initiatives, financial management, and grant administration and compliance.

In 2010, The Corps Network conducted an on-site Excellence in Corps Operations (ECO) review of governing structure, operating procedures, policies, programs and staffing. The ECO review is a standards-based peer-review process developed by The Corps Network and experts from conservation service corps nationwide. Shortly after the on-site review, the Conservation Corps was awarded its second ECO status, an indication that quality programs were operated by experience management.

### STAFFING

Executive Director Len Price provides leadership and management for the organization. Len has a history of public leadership, having served in the Minnesota Legislature for 20 years. Presently, he serves on the board for the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and The Corps Network in Washington, D.C., and is an alternate advisory member to the national 21st Century Conservation Service Corps.

Program Director Eric Antonson serves on the Corps' management team and is responsible for overall program administration. Eric started in 2001 as an AmeriCorps member with Conservation Corps Minnesota. He served two years in the National Civilian Community Corps, holds a teaching degree, and is completing a master's in nonprofit administration. Eric has eight years of program management experience and has directed the AmeriCorps State program for the past five years.

Program Manager John Stelzner supervises other program staff, AmeriCorps members and youth participants, and is responsible for recruitment, service project coordination and education. After earning a B.S. in environmental studies with an education emphasis, John began his Conservation Corps Minnesota service in 2007 as an AmeriCorps member. John has been involved with AmeriCorps program management for the last four years.

When program staff are hired, they receive a comprehensive orientation. Personal development plans are created for each staff person as part of an annual performance review. Monthly program staff meetings provide opportunities for ongoing training and technical assistance, as do quarterly meetings convened by the state commission (ServeMinnesota) that bring together staff from various

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state AmeriCorps programs.

Program staff work together to design member training and ensure consistent practices at all sites. Staff incorporate their extensive knowledge of youth development and natural resource management into trainings. When applicable, outside experts provide training for skills such as conducting prescribed fires, Wilderness First Aid and leading adjudicated youth. Staff plan service projects with community partners to ensure critical needs are met with best practices, AmeriCorps policy adherence and a positive member experience. Program staff monitor service sites and conduct periodic on-site visits to review member service activities, interview members and site supervisors, observe members leading youth, and verify safety and risk management procedures.

Staff have worked with external evaluators in the past to implement program evaluations. For example, three years ago staff worked with researchers from the Wilder Research as they examined the program impact on youth participants. Staff can provide data, alumni contact information, and other resources to external evaluators as needed. Currently, staff members are working with external evaluators to review program quality.

### AMERICORPS & FEDERAL FUNDS EXPERIENCE

This program began as an AmeriCorps State Formula grantee in the 2008-2009 program year and is presently completing the second year of a three-year AmeriCorps State Competitive grant of \$598,000 per year for 46 MSY. A renewed AmeriCorps State Competitive grant would enable the Corps to engage 40 MSY in essential youth job training and environmental service.

As an organization, the Conservation Corps has previously managed AmeriCorps funds as a recipient of a National Direct grant, a one-year recovery act grant, and was a subgrantee of The Corps Network. The organization has also managed federal funds through the U.S. Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service. The Corps has worked with CNCS on a reimbursement basis for disaster response after tornados in Joplin, Missouri and more recently after Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey.

### INTEGRATION AND SUPPORT

All Conservation Corps programs are AmeriCorps programs. The board of directors implemented a strategic plan in 2010 that incorporated priority areas identified by the Corporation for National and Community Service. Systems for tracking data used by the Conservation Corps were designed to fulfill AmeriCorps reporting requirements. National service is integral to the operational systems and ingrained in the organizational culture, with 16 AmeriCorps alumni on staff.

The Conservation Corps has nine years of experience managing various AmeriCorps grants and

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is highly proficient at training and mentoring members, managing service projects, coordinating with partners and administering federal grants. In the past three years, 100% of partners have indicated that AmeriCorps service projects had positive impacts on the community.

### **SUSTAINABILITY**

The Corps has established long-term relationships with more than 120 partners and stakeholders, such as state departments of natural resources, workforce and economic development, federal fish and wildlife, forest and national park services, county conservation boards, city parks and recreation departments, trail clubs, volunteer groups, schools and universities, and environmental learning centers. Through these many and diverse partnerships, the Conservation Corps has been successful in securing the financial resources necessary to support program implementation and address the identified needs. Current partners, including the Department of Natural Resources, City of Saint Paul, Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, Renville County, Redwood Area Development Corporation, Fred C. and Katherine B. Andersen Foundation, Lloyd K. Johnson Foundation, Xcel Energy, SmartWool, David B. Gold Foundation and others provide resources to engage youth in environmental restoration projects that directly benefit the community.

Multi-year service projects lessen the planning burden on agencies and volunteers and give communities more time to build sustaining project support. By providing capacity-building training, workshops and hands-on projects, the Corps will help ensure partners maintain projects. The Corps will survey agencies on their plans to follow up, maintain, use volunteers and build on services provided by members. Proposals with solid sustainability plans that incorporate a community support network and maintenance plan will receive preference.

The Corps completed a five-year strategic plan in 2010 and a three-year development plan in 2012. Both lay the framework for expanding fundraising efforts to diversify funding and increase support from foundations, corporations and individuals to sustain the program beyond the AmeriCorps grant. The Corps has already increased charitable contributions from \$41,440 in 2008 to \$127,034 in 2011. Additionally, as project partners have realized the impact of AmeriCorps members and youth, these organizations have been willing to contribute more cash match. These two factors account for the decreased amount requested per member in the current grant, down to \$11,975 per MSY from the previous grant period of \$13,000 per MSY.

### **COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The Corps has nine years of experience managing federal grants. Payroll, member recruitment, enrollment and exit, contracting and invoicing, and data tracking are centralized at administrative

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headquarters in Saint Paul and documented in a program operating procedures manual to ensure compliance. The program operating procedures are reviewed annually by ServeMinnesota, the Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service. ServeMinnesota staff also conduct monitoring visits that include review of member files, technical support for program staff, and site visits with members and site supervisors.

The Corps' accounting and financial policies and procedures have earned high ratings in every annual audit since becoming a nonprofit. The Corps also ensures compliance through completion of a federal A-133 audit each year. Sound written financial policies include separation of duties, financial controls and regular reporting. The Board of Directors finance committee reviews revenue and expenses monthly and reports to the full board. The finance committee also performs internal audits once per year to ensure financial accuracy and member file completion.

AmeriCorps manuals, service agreements and project partner contracts, with prohibited service activities listed, are developed and updated by program staff and disseminated at orientations to ensure members and site partners do not engage in any prohibited service activities. Roles and responsibilities are defined in member position descriptions. Green job training for youth, habitat restoration and outdoor recreation access improvements are reported on bi-monthly accomplishment tracking logs, submitted to staff for review, then entered in a central database to ensure members are only performing assigned activities. Non-duplication, non-displacement and non-supplementation requirements are included in project partner contracts. This, along with weekly check-ins and regular site visits, would help detect any prohibited service activities. Any violation would immediately be reported to CNCS and activities suspended until a corrective action plan is approved.

### DEMONSTRATED COMPLIANCE

The Conservation Corps has never had a compliance issue related to member service activities. With the Corps' experience managing AmeriCorps programs, the staff and systems are in place to administer an AmeriCorps State grant in full compliance with the regulations. Staff review and update the written program operating procedures on an annual basis to ensure consistency and compliance. ServeMinnesota reviews member files during the first quarter of the program year, examines program-operating procedures and conducts monitoring visits annually to ensure compliance.

ServeMinnesota staff also provide program improvement ideas in areas not related to compliance. While not an issue of compliance, the site visits have provided useful feedback. For example, in 2009, ServeMinnesota program officers identified helping members develop a stronger connection with other AmeriCorps programs and the AmeriCorps identity as an area for

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improvement. Since that time, Conservation Corps members have participated in the InterCorps Council of Minnesota and AmeriCorps Week events. Furthermore, the Conservation Corps has increased use of the AmeriCorps logo at service sites, websites and on printed materials.

### ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION

The Corps has a 100% enrollment rate for all AmeriCorps grants since becoming an AmeriCorps State program, including the last program year. Retention rate in the current State Competitive grant is 92.5%, due to an increase in members exiting after securing full-time employment in natural resources, energy efficiency, or a green collar job.

To improve retention, the Corps will continue to emphasize the AmeriCorps message of serving the community for the entire term and, before enrollment, distribute a "Final Considerations" document and full position description, which outlines the financial, physical and emotional challenges of service. In 2011, the Corps implemented an online community to connect applicants with alumni so they can gain more information about the program, projects and other issues.

### Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy

#### COST EFFECTIVENESS

The Conservation Corps is requesting \$478,981 in federal funds to support 53 members (40 MSY). Typically, the service hours completed with 27 FT and 26 HT members would total 69,300 hours. However, by engaging at-risk and underrepresented youth as part of the solution the program is able to deliver 105,750 hours of service, effectively increasing the service output to the community - and cost effectiveness - by 50%. CNCS will experience a cost of \$11,975 per MSY, a full \$1,325 less than the maximum allowed of \$13,300. The Conservation Corps will provide a cash match of \$317,467, which is equal to 40% of program costs.

#### SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMATIC FUNDS

The Conservation Corps is a strong, expanding nonprofit that has successfully raised funds and in-kind support from a variety of non-federal sources to steadily increase the people and communities served over the last 10 years. Overall organizational funding includes 64% partner support, 17% state grants and dedicated funds, 14% CNCS AmeriCorps grants and 5% charitable contributions. The proposed project accounts for 20% of the total organizational budget.

#### PREVIOUS CNCS SUPPORT

The Conservation Corps has a strong track record of managing CNCS funds. AmeriCorps State grants in the last five years have included two one-year formula funded grants and one competitively funded grant. In 2004, Conservation Corps Minnesota became a Corps Network sub-grantee of a 3-

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year Rural Response National Direct grant, receiving \$538,200/year for 46 MSY to engage in disaster preparedness and response. In 2008, a \$365,400/year National Direct grant enabled us to launch Conservation Corps Iowa with 10 MSY based in Ames, along with 19 MSY in Minnesota to exclusively complete technical conservation projects that are not age-appropriate for high school youth who participate in the State AmeriCorps program. In 2009, a CNCS American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) grant of \$104,000 enabled the Corps to launch a home weatherization program. In 2012, Conservation Corps was awarded a National Direct grant for technical conservation projects in Minnesota and Iowa, again not suitable for high school age youth.

### DIVERSE RESOURCES FOR PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The AmeriCorps State Competitive grant will comprise 60% of the program budget, with the Conservation Corps providing the remaining 40% in cash match. The program is anticipated to generate needed matching funds from five main areas:

- 1) 35% from partner support through service projects with nonprofits and public agencies.
- 2) 27% from state grant and dedicated funds from natural resource license and user fees.
- 3) 16% from charitable grants and donations and in-kind contributions.
- 4) 16% from Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment funds to protect, enhance, and restore natural habitat, parks and trails, and water.
- 5) 6% from the ServeMinnesota Innovation Fund to help programs meet match requirements.

To date, the program has 51% of cash match commitments from partner support and the Legacy Amendment. The Conservation Corps has met match targets every year of operation as an AmeriCorps State program for each of the other sources identified. Based on all available indicators, the Corps is confident the other sources will be secured before the program year begins. Staff are implementing an aggressive fundraising plan and seeking increased funding from the State of Minnesota, which has provided funding for the past 10 years.

### COST EFFECTIVE APPROACH

Addressing environmental issues is often the responsibility of public agencies. However, shrinking budgets have limited the ability of natural resource agencies to manage the ever-growing backlog of projects. The Conservation Corps completes these backlogged projects, provides benefit to society, and does so at a cost far less than the agencies could accomplish on their own. A study published by the U.S. Department of the Interior in the fall 2012, found that conservation service corps across the country saved National Parks an average of 65% when completing backlogged projects, as compared to completing these projects in-house if staff had the capacity to do so.

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Conservation Corps Minnesota was one of the eight conservation service corps included in the study. The dollars spent serve the dual purpose of funding youth development and green job training.

### DECREASE IN REQUESTED FUNDS

The Corps is requesting \$1,025 less per MSY than the previous grant provided, down to \$11,975 per MSY from the previous \$13,000. The Corps has successfully expanded and enhanced its program in the past two years of the State Competitive grant and established a diverse spectrum of support and partnerships. Because of its proven record of performance, project partners have increased confidence in Corps service delivery and are willing to provide a greater share of the costs. Because of strong youth development outcomes, private donations and grants have continued to grow as well.

### BUDGET ADEQUACY

The total budget is projected to be \$796,447, which is adequate to carry out the activities and accomplishments proposed. The CNCS share is \$478,981 and grantee share is \$317,467.

The program budget includes member orientation and training, staff salaries and benefits, member stipends above the minimum and below the maximum amounts required, health insurance, background checks, workers compensation, liability insurance, office leases, purchase and maintenance of tools and safety gear, vehicle leases and fuel, and staff travel to CNCS events. The budget also reflects program values that include significant and meaningful staff involvement with members on a regular basis; reducing barriers that exclude low-income youth and stipended members from participating, such as providing transportation; and ensuring the safety of all participants by providing adequate gear, training, workers compensation and health care coverage. Addressing these items in the budget ensures meeting community needs through program outputs and outcomes, staying in compliance with all regulations, and offering a quality experience and opportunity for members to carry forward a legacy of service.

The Corps has successfully developed a cost-effective operational structure that delivers highly-skilled services to address community needs by using program strengths and strategic partnerships; 93% of organizational revenue is spent directly on programming. The budget is appropriate for environmental service programs committed to safety and quality. It reflects a strong emphasis on member training and support, which is essential for success during and after their year of service.

### Evaluation Summary or Plan

In program year 2008-2009, Wilder Research evaluated program impact on former youth participants (ages 15-18). Wilder Research identified strengths in the areas of: offering new experiences to youth, fostering a diverse and inclusive environment, personal development, and

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impact on future decisions. In program year 2009-2010, The Corps Network conducted the Excellence in Corps Operations (ECO) review. The review identified strengths in the areas of: purpose and activities, organization and management, and work experience and service projects.

In program year 2011-2012, the Conservation Corps started a comprehensive evaluation of its program. First, the Corps will be involved in an area-wide database that tracks out-of-school activities and connects them to in-school student achievement. Aggregate reports on youth participants will also include comparisons to youth not involved with out-of-school programs. Second, Corps staff received training and will receive ongoing technical support from University of Minnesota staff to implement the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) designed by the Weikart Center. The YPQA is a research-validated and field-tested tool designed to evaluate program quality.

### **Amendment Justification**

N/A

### **Clarification Summary**

N/A

### **Continuation Changes**

N/A