

Narratives

Executive Summary

Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) proposes to engage 291 (154.31 MSY) AmeriCorps members in a versatile 21st Century Conservation Service Corps model intervention that mobilizes young Americans and veterans to protect at-risk ecosystems and improve natural resources on public lands and in communities across Montana, and connected ecosystems in Idaho, Wyoming, North and South Dakota. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will have improved 600 miles of community and backcountry trails. They will have enhanced 5,000 acres of parks and public lands by mitigating invasive weeds, reducing wildfire risks, and restoring natural habitat, and they will have installed low-cost weatherization measures to make 1,000 homes of low-income residents more energy efficient. 1,100 youth, homeowners, and volunteers will have increased knowledge and skills for environmental stewardship. The AmeriCorps members will include 20 veterans serving with MCC's Veterans Green Corps, where they will earn professional certifications for environmental jobs. The AmeriCorps members will leverage 1,000 volunteers as active stewards of local parks and trails.

This program targets the CNCS focus areas of environmental stewardship, and veterans and military families. With demonstrated excellence in managing AmeriCorps cost-reimbursement grants since 1994, MCC is presently applying for a fixed-amount grant of \$1,872,000 that will be leveraged with \$3.9 million in fee-for-service contributions from federal, state, and local government agencies and nonprofit partners, and from private grants and donations. The CNCS share comprises 32% of program costs, as MCC significantly lowers the cost-per-member and federal share while increasing services.

Rationale and Approach/Program Design

1. PROBLEM/NEED

"Spectacular, Unspoiled Nature." Montana's "brand" - as described in the 2013 Montana Tourism and Recreation Strategic Plan - attracted over 11 million visitors last year to explore our 38 million acres of public lands and 15,000 miles of trails. In turn, these visitors stimulated a \$5.8 million outdoor recreation economy (Outdoor Industry Association, 2014) while enjoying iconic places like Yellowstone - the first national park in the world. Outdoor recreation on these public lands provides a "competitive advantage" that boosts job growth and wages in Montana communities near protected public lands ("West is the Best," Headwaters Economics, 2012). Montanans are also personally connected to these lands with 95% saying outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life (2014 Montana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), MT. Dept. of Fish, Wildlife

Narratives

and Parks).

However, Montana's spectacular ecosystems are severely at-risk. The Montana Weed Control Association reports that 7.6 million acres are currently infested with state-listed noxious weeds, with new and potentially devastating invaders knocking on the door at our borders (www.mtweed.org). Weeds like spotted knapweed and leafy spurge reduce forage, increase soil erosion, modify habitat structure, and threaten biological diversity. The Montana Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan reports in excess of \$42 million in annual economic impact, and long-term impacts to the productive potential of the land, water quality and quantity, and plant and animal resources. Healthy forest ecosystems also are being degraded by infestations of mountain pine beetle that have resulted in widespread tree mortality. The U.S. Dept. of Agriculture identified 2.24 million acres of Montana forests damaged by these infestations (Montana Forest Insect and Disease Conditions and Program Highlights, USDA, 2012). Forests of standing dead trees increase the severity of wildfires and leave millions of hazard trees along roadways and trails. During the 2012 fire season, more than 1.1 million acres burned in Montana - the most since 1910 (Billings Gazette, Nov.1, 2012). Montana's rivers and streams are also threatened by local and global forces. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality's 2014 Water Quality Integrated Report states that 71% of Montana's rivers, streams, and lakes are impaired. Clearly, the need for environmental stewardship is paramount. Since 1991, diverse federal, state, local government, and nonprofit conservation partners have called on MCC to put AmeriCorps members on the frontline of environmental stewardship to improve public lands.

Decreasing budgets also are eroding the ability of public agencies to provide safe access to our public lands. While record crowds - over three million - visited Yellowstone National Park this year, the National Park Service reports a \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog that threatens wildlife, historic structures, and trails (SCORP, 2014). Montana's state parks experienced a 13% increase in visitation since 2011, with over 2.1 million visitors last year - twice Montana's population (Montana State Parks, 2013 Annual Visitation Report). The Forest Service faces similar challenges. The 2013 Government Accountability Office Forest Service Trails report (GAO-13-618) found that only 26% of trails met Forest Service standards. The GAO documented \$314 million in deferred trail maintenance nationally. The GAO observed "to remain safe and usable, these trails need regular maintenance, such as removal of downed trees or bridge repairs." Of the 28,156 miles of trails in the Forest Service Northern Region, an area that spans Montana from northern Idaho to western North Dakota (18% of the nation's Forest Service trails), only 7,600 miles of trails are at agency standards per the Northern

Narratives

Region Trails Coordinator. The Forest Service actively engages MCC AmeriCorps members to help improve and develop sustainable trails. The Regional Forester explains that "without the assistance of the MCC AmeriCorps members, local staff at the ranger district level would not have the additional capacity [...] to address trail maintenance, landscape restoration and fuels reduction needs across Montana."

Montana also suffers from an abundance of older, poorly weatherized homes that waste energy and increase carbon emissions and burden our lowest income residents with high heating costs. The Montana Weatherization Program reports over 20,000 households qualified for low income energy assistance (Dept. of Public Health & Human Services, Weatherization Assistance Program, 2012-2014 Comparison Report). The Governor's Warm Hearts Warm Homes program relies on members to install low cost energy retrofit measures and educate residents to help them reduce their energy consumption.

However, the greatest threat is a generation of young people growing up with little connection to nature, and limited knowledge and skills for the outdoors. Today's youth are the most diverse and most urban generation in U.S. history. But, technology has been a much stronger influence in their lives than nature (Paul Taylor and the Pew Research Center; The Next America). According to the CDC's 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, over half of Montana adolescents spend over 6 hours "on screen" each day. This is a crisis for the environment in that without experiences of nature, this generation is developing little understanding of their role as the future stewards of the environment. In the study, *Connecting America's Youth to Nature*, the Nature Conservancy finds that a majority of youth rate the condition of the environment as a "very serious" or "extremely serious" problem, but that 80% of youth are uncomfortable in nature. The study also showed that when they did have experiences outdoors, 66% of youth reflected it made them appreciate nature more and encouraged greater engagement in environmental stewardship. When engaged with nature, young people find a passion for improving the world and have opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways. MCC brings young people together as AmeriCorps members and as volunteers to work on outdoor projects as a means of helping them develop as leaders, conservationists, and engaged citizens. Environmental stewardship also becomes a pathway for veterans to learn skills and retool their leadership for civilian roles. Montana has the second highest number per capita of veterans (VA, StateMaster.com), and one of the highest rates (12.3%) of unemployment for Post 9/11 veterans (U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, State by State Report, 10/2014). MCC is engaging these veterans as a new professional cohort of environmental stewards.

Narratives

2. THEORY OF CHANGE AND LOGIC MODEL

To protect Montana's "spectacular, unspoiled nature," and mobilize a new generation of environmental stewards, MCC proposes a multi-pronged, 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) intervention that puts young Americans and veterans to work protecting and enhancing lands in Montana and the Northern Rockies and Plains. Our theory of change is that well-trained leaders, corps members, youth, and volunteers have a profound impact improving environmental resources resulting in significant ecological, economic, health, and social benefits for our communities, while also providing significant benefits for the participants themselves. Since 1991, MCC has supported over 1,200 project partners to improve 14,000 miles of trails, plant 1.1 million trees, treat 92,000 acres for invasive weeds, and retrofit 12,000 Montana homes for energy conservation. Over 3,000 AmeriCorps members have served under MCC's mission to "inspire young people through hands-on conservation service to be leaders, stewards of the land, and engaged citizens who improve their communities."

The strength of MCC's theory of change resides in a proven program design that leverages the transformative power of the corps service experience, with a robust network of public and nonprofit conservation partners, with the high capacity of members and volunteers to get things done to improve public lands and trails.

The root of the member experience is the daily challenge of working hard with a group of people to accomplish tasks of clear benefit to the environment and community. Members inventory and spray invasive weeds, use chainsaws to thin wildfire-prone forest or remove hazard trees, plant native vegetation to stabilize stream banks, remove or repair fences to reduce wildlife mortality and protect habitat, and maintain or construct trails to improve access to public lands. Members also lead volunteers for service day events, and on month-long summer Youth Service Expeditions for teens. These experiences for members foster work skills, cultivate communication and problem-solving skills, and develop grit. Meaningful conservation projects foster passion for service and develop knowledge and strengthen connections with the environment.

Consistent across MCC's portfolio of offerings - including our premier Leader Development Program(58 FT & 30 PT members), five-month Field Crews (130 PT), three-month Veteran Green Corps (20 vet QT members) and Invasive Weeds or Saw Crews (31 QT), one-month Youth Service Expeditions for teens, and three-month Conservation Intern cohort (22 QT) - is a deliberate and intensive program design to foster teamwork, leadership development, civic engagement, and

Narratives

knowledge and skills for environmental stewardship. Training and education are interwoven into every aspect of the experience. For example, a field crew (2 leaders and 5 members) immersed in the Bob Marshall Wilderness building puncheon to restore a fragile wetland meadow from braided trails, will meet around the campfire for a lesson taken from MCC's Public Lands and Citizenship Education curriculum and dialogue around the controversies surrounding wolf reintroduction in the Northern Rockies. Or, a group of teenage Youth Service Expedition participants and their two AmeriCorps crew leaders may hear from a local land trust about the public process involved in creating the new city park where they are planting trees. A Veteran Green Corps team will break from chainsaw work clearing juniper trees encroaching in sage grouse grassland habitat for a workshop on communication skills in less structured civilian work settings. By living, learning, and working on the land, members develop a strong connection to nature and grow as environmental leaders and practitioners. Corp experiences are transformative, as reflected in one member's evaluation. "I feel like I really embraced what it meant to be civically engaged in a community, whether it was feeling really passionate about city issues and frequenting public meetings, or working towards organizing service events and reaching out to community partners."

The second link in our program design is our network of 170+ annual project partners who leverage the power of AmeriCorps to meet environmental needs. These partners include nonprofit organizations and municipal, state, and federal agencies in communities all across Montana, the Northern Rockies and Plains. These partners identify projects where AmeriCorps members may provide the critical, missing hands-on resource to protect public lands, improve trails, or install energy conservation measures. An application process ensures projects have been vetted as a priority and that they provide a clear and sustainable public benefit, that they have undergone all necessary permitting or public review processes, and that the sponsor is prepared to host the AmeriCorps members in compliance with CNCS rules and prohibited activities. Partners also provide specialized training and orient members to the needs for the project. This bolsters members' commitment to good results.

All the elements of thoughtful program design come together on projects. In 2014, MCC accomplished 336 projects with 182 partners for a total of 886 weeks of service projects - nearly 300,000 hours. MCC offers a versatile tool for stewardship as we can serve partners with a diverse portfolio of high quality programs - including young adult, teenage, and veteran crews of 6-8 members as well as smaller teams and individual interns with specialized credentials (i.e.: chainsaw, chemical applicator certificate, GIS.) MCC may also accommodate projects of different durations -- from a week-long project to dust prairie dog burrows with an insecticide that kills the fleas that

Narratives

transmit sylvatic plague to endangered black-footed ferrets, to a multi-month trail reconstruction of the popular Meriwether Trail destroyed by a wildfire years earlier. Each fall, members spend two weeks installing low-cost energy conservation measures in the homes of seniors and residents who qualify for low income energy assistance. Year after year, MCC partners praise the enthusiasm and contributions of MCC AmeriCorps members. A Forest Service partner commented, "both crews did outstanding work and were very energetic. This project wouldn't have been able to happen without the MCC crews. I look forward to working with MCC on future projects."

MCC also excels at mobilizing communities for stewardship by putting tools in the hands of volunteers and students on dozens of local environmental projects for events like National Trails Day and Make a Difference Day. Especially for middle and high school students, MCC-hosted service days are one of their first opportunities to get outside to do something practical to help the environment. 97% of 1,919 volunteers in 2014 reported a positive experience with MCC.

3. EVIDENCE BASE

MCC presents robust evidence in support of our interventions to improve at-risk ecosystems and increase behaviors for environmental stewardship. Firstly, MCC's own project evaluation data demonstrates tremendous annual results in improving at-risk ecosystems. Over the past three years, MCC AmeriCorps members, youth crews, and volunteers, have improved 2,873 miles of trails, treated 69,002 acres for weeds, planted 75,606 trees and shrubs, protected 1,053 acres from wildfires, and retrofitted 3,552 homes to decrease energy consumption. Overall, 95% of partners rated project impacts a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale. 100% said they'd use MCC again. Consistently, over 90% of partners rate the quality of work, crew productivity, and crew leadership as very good or excellent.

Secondly, in 2011, 2012, and 2013, MCC participated in the Public Lands Service Coalition Evaluation, a well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study with fourteen other programs, to assess the impacts on members of participating in a conservation corps. The 2013 PLSC evaluation included 1,334 corps members, of which 400 (30%) were MCC members. Evaluators Michael Edwards, PhD, College of Natural Resources at North Carolina State University, and Mat Duerden, PhD, Marriot School of Management at Brigham Young University, used a public sample comparison group that was pre-screened to match the demographic profile of the corps participants, and a retrospective pre-post survey instrument. Edwards and Duerden explain that, "compared to traditional pre-post designs, this approach allows participants to more accurately report changes in condition because they have a better understanding of their baseline condition." (p. 21). This quasi-

Narratives

experimental design study meets the criteria for moderate evidence.

Findings from the PLSC evaluation were positive across a range of outcomes, especially for environmental engagement. Results showed that the participants' growth in attitudes toward the environment and pro-environmental behavior was 386% higher than the comparison group. Other positive outcomes included leadership growth (566% higher), and growth in community engagement (369% higher than the comparison group). These results are evidence of MCC's positive effect toward our mission goals to develop "leaders, stewards of the land, and engaged citizens who improve their communities," and they validate MCC's impact in the CNCS focus area for environmental stewardship.

Finally, we provide evidence from the Forest Service that MCC's interventions improves at-risk ecosystems. MCC's Invasive Species Strike Team has been on the front-line of an integrated noxious weed management strategy to detect and eradicate pioneer colonies of invasive weeds in the Selway-Bitterroot, Anaconda Pintler, and Frank Church River of No Return wilderness areas. These teams receive special training in weed identification and are certified with the state chemical applicator license so that they can operate independently in backcountry sites that are beyond the reach of traditional weed contractors. The Montana State University-Extension publication, Preventing Noxious Weed Invasions (p.2), states that "preventing and controlling noxious weed encroachment depends on early detection." The Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks' 2008 Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan lists "early detection" and "rapid response and management" among six major components for effective weed management. The attached official 2010-2013 Forest Plan Monitoring Report from the Bitterroot National Forest, specifically highlights the success of the MCC Invasive Species Strike Teams at numerous sites. The Bitterroot National Forest reports, "the MCC Invasive Species Strike Team program has proved particularly successful in carrying out their detection and treatment assignments [...] The Forest has used the program to bolster our highest priority early detection/eradication efforts against the pioneering invasion of rush skeletonweed along the Idaho-Montana border [...] These are remote rugged areas that require a well-trained and self-sufficient crew in order to achieve success." In 2013, this weed crew alone treated 2,975 acres. As a demonstrated effective practice, the Invasive Weeds Strike Team model is being replicated in 2015 with the Gallatin National Forest and Yellowstone National Park. These teams represent part of the MCC AmeriCorps resource that treated near 54,000 acres for invasive species in 2014 -- a record near ten times our five-year average and a sign of MCC's increasing role in weed management.

Narratives

4. NOTICE PRIORITY

MCC addresses the priority for environmental stewardship by improving at-risk ecosystems and increasing knowledge and behaviors for energy efficiency and ecosystem improvement in members, youth volunteers, and homeowners. In 2014 alone, members conserved an astonishing 54,000 acres of parks and public lands, improved 660 miles of trails, retrofitted 1,160 homes for energy conservation, and educated 2,717 homeowners with tips to reduce energy use. In 2013, MCC was one of the first corps to be selected into the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps by federal land agencies. MCC's activities align directly with the objectives of the 21CSC, and our federal partners rely on MCC to engage youth in outdoor service, protect America's natural, cultural, and historical resources, and develop a new generation of public lands workers and stewards. MCC's competencies also align with the Montana Governor's "Forests in Focus" initiative which aims to promote stewardship and restore forests and watersheds, reduce fire risks, and improve habitat. MCC's Veteran Green Corps program aligns with the Veterans and Military Families priority. Though it is a smaller program, this is a major commitment by MCC and the program is right-sized for veterans and our partners. Twenty veterans will serve on four crews and earn professional certifications to increase their employability. Lastly, MCC supports the disaster services priority. MCC is a member of the AmeriCorps Disaster Response Team with a special agreement with CNCS and participates in monthly calls with the CNCS Disaster Services Unit. MCC members are trained and ready to deploy, as we demonstrated with high competency after hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, and most recently with the Detroit flood recovery mission assignment.

5. MEMBER TRAINING

The core of all MCC experiences is our five program objectives: 1) volunteer service and civic engagement; 2) communication and team skills; 3) leadership values and competencies; 4) environmental stewardship; and 5) hard work for quality results. All training is designed to foster these competencies and prepare members to serve competently throughout their term of service. MCC delivers a nationally recognized, three-month crew leader training program starting during the winter months (Feb-April) when project work is limited. A group of full-time members develop technical and "soft" skills to be effective leaders for MCC field, veteran and youth crews. This training includes an orientation to AmeriCorps, skills training for chainsaws, trail work, and first aid, and practice in group facilitation, teaching and leadership styles, volunteer management, and disaster

Narratives

response. Members serving on field crews, Veteran Green Corps teams, or as Conservation Interns start in May, and receive two weeks of orientation and pre-service training in conservation skills, first aid, wilderness travel and camping, and team development skills. Veterans get certified in chainsaw and firefighting, or other specialized natural resource certification. Weed crews earn a chemical applicator license and learn to identify target species. Once on projects, the sponsor provides training specific to the needs of each project. Every member participates in weekly lessons from MCC's Public Lands and Citizenship Education (PLACE) curriculum or from the "Meaning of Service" readings series. These lessons link their outdoor service to a broader awareness of citizen leadership and civic responsibility.

6. MEMBER SUPERVISION

MCC's four-region structure and team-oriented design ensures members, whether on crews or as interns, receive high-quality guidance and support throughout their term of service. The member orientation reviews MCC policies and AmeriCorps prohibited activities. A strong emphasis on the crew dynamic creates a culture for supportive feedback, and for responsibility and accountability. This same dynamic is fostered within the cohort of interns through shared training and regular check-ins. Members complete Individual Action Plans with their supervisor early in the term, then receive in-person midterm and final written evaluations. AmeriCorps leaders maintain a daily log, and each crew is debriefed by a supervisor after every project. MCC Project Coordinators regularly visit crews in the field or at intern sites to share technical expertise and support member development. MCC supervisors have up-to-date knowledge of AmeriCorps regulations and priorities. Many staff served in AmeriCorps themselves. Strong oversight of the regional offices by the headquarters provides a check and balance for regional operations. During the January "kick off" staff meeting, we review AmeriCorps regulations to ensure the staff is fully up-to-date with policies and procedures.

7. MEMBER EXPERIENCE

MCC is a defining national service experience. Through the training and project work, members learn practical job skills - from how to build a fence to how to bring a group together in common purpose. Challenging and purposeful projects bring meaning to their service. MCC's Public Lands and Citizenship Education, and a readings series give ample opportunities for reflection. MCC's crew design, regional structure, and our blog and Facebook community create an internal AmeriCorps community. Participation in service events, like the ServeMontana Symposium and Make a Difference

Narratives

Day connect members with others in Montana's national service community. Members also are required to attend one public meeting and volunteer ten hours outside their MCC activities to connect to their community and explore the workings of democracy. One 2014 member reflected, "through the emphasis on civic engagement and the meaning of service, I have found I care more about issues in the world and feel less helpless about how overwhelming they often seem. Now, having had the experience of doing something local, I've learned that making change for the better around you is the first and most important step in effecting change in the world." Word of mouth, our website, and the AmeriCorps website are our most effective recruitment venues. In 2014, MCC received three applications for every position, and 29% of members were Montana residents, with others coming from all corners of the country. 28% of members reported a disability on the ServeMontana Accommodations Assessment. Another member commented, "MCC definitely changed the course of my life for the better. No year of my life has sparked so much growth in myself, and love for the world."

8. COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTIFICATION

MCC's mission emphasizes developing engaged citizens who improve their community, thus MCC has a strong affinity with AmeriCorps. We proudly engage all members in taking the Pledge, and whether they are in their MCC uniform or AmeriCorps "greys," members always wear the AmeriCorps logo. The logo is prominent on our website and in publications. Our recruitment process and member agreement emphasize AmeriCorps. In orienting project partners to host a crew or intern, MCC ensures they understand the responsibilities, regulations, and prohibited activities associated with working with members. MCC actively participates in statewide national service events, and enthusiastically promotes AmeriCorps in the press. Nine of the twenty Montana AmeriCorps members recognized by Governor Bullock for their continuing service during the 20th anniversary celebration were MCC AmeriCorps alums.

Organizational Capability

1. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING

MCC was founded in 1991 and has stewarded AmeriCorps grants for 20 years. The President/CEO has led the organization since 2002, tripling the scale and impact of MCC. He has an MA in environmental studies and nonprofit administration, served six years on the board of directors for The Corps Network, and recently ended two terms as board chair of the Montana Nonprofit Association. The executive leadership team of the Director of Operations, Director of Partnerships, Program

Narratives

Director, and Director of Development and Communications has a combined 65 years experience administering AmeriCorps grants. The Director of Operations is a CPA with a background in public auditing where she performed A-133 audits. The Director of Partnerships has dual master's degrees in education and counseling. The Program Director was a VISTA team leader before serving as training officer for the Montana State Commission on Community Service. The Development and Communications Director excelled in positions with United Way and Trust for Public Land. A competent headquarters team leads all financial, member recruitment and enrollment, program quality, and communications functions.

The members serve from one of four regional offices in Bozeman, Helena, Kalispell, and Missoula. Each Regional Director has over ten years experience leading corps programs. These directors are MCC's boots-on-the-ground, engaging with community members to identify needs and coordinate projects, and supervising our regional staff which include a program manager, field coordinators, and a youth coordinator. The regional staff provides supervision and training for the members. All have substantial AmeriCorps experience with MCC or other corps, including NCCC. MCC has evolved this four-region structure to provide consistent management of a complex program across a vast state, while also enabling each regional office to respond to local needs and emerging opportunities. MCC has longstanding relationships with a network of hundreds of partner organizations. These partners support near 900 project weeks per year and provide over \$3.8 million in match support. They rely on MCC as an essential resource to protect public lands, engage youth, and develop a future workforce.

MCC is governed by a diverse Board of Directors with statewide representation. The board meets quarterly, with interim committee meetings. In 2014, MCC completed a comprehensive strategic plan to increase service opportunities for youth and respond to the increasing needs of conservation partners and the emerging priorities of the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps.

2. COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

MCC has an outstanding record of compliance and accountability. Over fifteen years of A-133 audited financial statements with unqualified opinions, three successful reviews by the Office of the Inspector General, and annual financial or program reviews by the ServeMontana staff demonstrate MCC's strong capacity to prevent and, if necessary, detect and correct compliance issues in a timely fashion. Auditors and the state commission have determined MCC to be a low-risk auditee. Both in our financial management and member management systems, MCC has put in place effective checks and balances systems. For example, prior to enrollment, all member conditional offer paperwork and

Narratives

background checks are double-checked by separate staff to ensure proper enrollment procedures. Periodic internal audits of member files ensure best practices are followed, including triple checks of time sheets for any members within 10% of required hours. To ensure members do not engage in prohibited activities, MCC orientation checklists verify they received this training, which is also included in every members' manual. Close supervision of member activities by staff also ensures members do not participate in unallowable activities. The Governor's Office commonly advises other AmeriCorps programs to contact MCC for guidance on grant management. MCC utilizes a sophisticated fund accounting software program that allows the organization to properly track and report expenses and revenues by grant, project and activity. The Director of Operations recently attended a 3-day workshop on the OMB Super Circular going into effect in December of 2014.

MCC annually reviews the AmeriCorps prohibited activities with staff. These are included in both the employee handbook and member manuals. We routinely have all-staff meetings where we discuss grant requirements, including criminal background checks, AmeriCorps regulations, and grant requirements. In addition, on an annual basis, staff and boards members sign a conflict of interest and code of ethics statement, which increases accountability and professionalism in relation to the AmeriCorps grant. Regional staff deliver an orientation to members to review AmeriCorps requirements and prohibited activities. Regional Directors meet with project partners to determine if proposed activities fit within the scope of our AmeriCorps grant and partners are asked to complete a project application detailing the activities and indicating non-displacement of workers. MCC staff visit projects to ensure compliance. MCC annually communicates with the state union representative to discuss future and past projects to verify the unions' approval of our activities.

3. PAST PERFORMANCE

MCC has a consistent track record of meeting ambitious performance targets. MCC has exceeded all of our output and outcome targets for acres of habitat and miles of trails improved, and the number of homes weatherized and residents educated for the past three years. Due to changing needs of our partners, results may fluctuate significantly from year to year. For example, in 2013, MCC completed 1053 miles of annual and deferred maintenance on trails, exceeding our goal of 650 miles. In 2014, members completed several complex capital improvement trails projects, such as a bridge replacement across Mill Creek in the Bitterroot Valley, that netted fewer miles of trails improved (660 miles) but provided great benefits for access and safety. The only measure that MCC has fallen short of over the past three years is our goal to enroll 20 veterans each year into the Veteran Green Corps.

Narratives

MCC enrolled 19 vets in 2013 and 17 in 2014. We continue to develop our outreach networks at universities, workforce centers, and with veterans organizations. For 2015, MCC has created a new Diversity and Inclusion Manager to focus on recruiting more diverse participants and increasing veteran engagement and services. Adjustments to program scheduling and training also increase benefits for veterans.

With three to four applicants for every position, MCC annually enrolls 100% of slots. MCC also has excellent retention, with 91.3% to 94.3% of members retained these last three years. Given the rigors of the program, MCC believes this is a very high retention rate. Yet, we continue to develop our recruitment and member support systems to ensure members may succeed and complete their term of service. MCC is committed to engaging diverse youth, veterans, and young people for whom a challenging AmeriCorps term spent protecting Montana's "spectacular, unspoiled nature" may also be a transformative experience that strongly shapes them as environmental stewards. In a state that is 87% white, over 25% of MCC participants are of other race or ethnicity. MCC has not had any compliance issues or areas of weakness/risk identified during the last three years.

Budget/Cost Effectiveness

1. COST EFFECTIVENESS

MCC requests a fixed price grant of \$1,965,592 to support 291 members (158.02 MSY) at a CNCS cost of \$12,439 per member. There will be 58 full-time members, 163 half time, and 70 quarter time members. All positions serve in a full-time capacity. MCC seeks an increase of 5.82 MSY to support the growing demand for environmental services from public and nonprofit partners, and to ensure that AmeriCorps may support the President's 21CSC initiative in Montana and the Northern Rocky Mountains and Plains region. Currently, MCC is turning away hundreds of interested applicants. The Forest Service increased by 10% its goal for youth involvement in 2014 and has similar goals for 2015 and beyond. The Park Service also has a goal to increase by five-fold to 100,000 the number of youth serving within 5 years. These agencies rely on MCC to help meet these goals.

MCC developed the budget based on twenty years of experience with AmeriCorps grant management. The budget is reasonable and closely aligned with the program design. Our staffing structure reflects continuous fine-tuning with leadership, management, and partnership stewardship from the headquarters in Bozeman, and efficient utilization of year-round and seasonal staff in the four regional offices to develop project support and community involvement, and to provide supervision of the far-flung members across America's fourth largest state. MCC has refined an orientation and training design to give members the necessary skills for productive service experiences

Narratives

and education for civic engagement and stewardship. MCC also invests in staff training to ensure best practices and continued improvement. In such a vast state, transportation of members and staff to project sites and providing meals while on backcountry hitches, represents a significant cost. MCC maintains a fleet of 65 vehicles to transport crews.

MCC has budgeted for \$3,883,681 in grantee share, or 66% of the total program cost. The match is comprised of diverse and sustainable sources of revenue including significant cost reimbursement from more than 150 project partners, and grants and donations. With 30% of Montana lands under federal authority, and 99% of trails on Forest Service lands, the significant portion of the grantee share is from other federal sources. Total grantee match of \$3,883,681 includes \$2,810,000 from the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; \$500,000 from the State of Montana DPHHS and Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; \$377,400 from local community nonprofit agencies; and \$196,281 from foundations and donations. MCC has participating agreements in place with all federal agencies. These are renewed every five years. These federal funds are allowable match, and MCC has written authorization from these agencies to use their funds as match to AmeriCorps. Grants and donations play an increasing role in supporting the expansion of environmental stewardship opportunities for members and youth with funders motivated to connect youth to the outdoors, develop leaders and stewards, and protect Montana's special places. MCC continues to demonstrate the strongest capacity to develop sustainable grantee share to increase opportunities for youth in service and environmental stewardship, with a lower cost per member and decreasing federal share.

2. BUDGET ADEQUACY: MCC is applying for a fixed amount grant. No detailed budget is required in compliance with the budget instructions. The overall program budget is \$5,849,592. MCC requests \$1,965,592, or 34% to support operating costs.

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF AN ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION APPROACH

The unique structure and targeted impacts of conservation corps programs (e.g., improvements to public lands and trails), requires the implementation of a rigorous, alternative evaluation approach. This request outlines the reasons necessitating an alternative approach.

Narratives

EVALUATION CONSTRAINTS FACED BY THE PROGRAM

The scope of the proposed evaluation focuses on specific environmental impacts of corps efforts. While the evaluation design focused on performance measures EN4 and EN5 will incorporate a rigorous pre-test/post-test design and comparisons across sites will be possible using control variables, randomization and the development of control groups of sites is not feasible. Corps work is directed by the priorities and needs of land managers as opposed to corps administrators. The purposeful designation of work sites based on land management priorities prohibit the inclusion of a valid control sample in the evaluation design. Since external partners (e.g., Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, etc.) select the projects and sites where conservation corps programs conduct their work, randomization of work sites is not administratively possible. Additionally, comparison work sites would need to be matched to treatment sites based upon specific baseline physical and ecological conditions. Sites (e.g. land plots or trail segments) that have comparable conditions would likely receive similar priority for selection for improvement and timing of improvements. Thus, we would not be able to include a comparable site as a control.

WHY THE PROPOSED APPROACH IS THE MOST RIGOROUS OPTION FEASIBLE

The proposed evaluation approach employs a rigorous pre-test/post-test design and the development of rapid visual assessment tools to collect systematic observation data of ecosystem health and trail quality. This design has been proposed by leading experts in the assessment of natural resources impacts at NC State University. The proposed evaluation design and tools will produce data appropriate for statistical analyses of change (e.g., ANOVA, linear mixed models) and accordingly rigorous assessments of the impact of conservation corps programs' impacts. This proposed innovative scientific approach would also result in the collection of baseline ecosystem health and trail quality data necessary to develop research in this area.

HOW THE PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE APPROACH WILL HELP CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAMS BUILD THEIR EVIDENCE BASE

Once program evaluation protocols are implemented established, this will not only provide relevant data for program design, but will allow future research projects that may be able to use randomization and comparisons, including the use of geo-visualization data collected at baseline. The development of the rapid visual assessment tools will also allow conservation corps programs to continue to collect their own objective impact data which will represent a significant advancement in current internal

Narratives

corps impact assessments.

Evaluation Summary or Plan

Montana's 38 million acres of public lands are imperiled by a myriad of threats including invasive weeds, wildfires and degraded trails. The agencies charged with maintaining these public land resources suffer from shrinking budgets which contribute to an ever increasing list of backlog maintenance needs. With tourism being the second largest contributor to the Montana economy, these conditions threaten our public lands and the economic vibrancy of Montana. MCC trains hundreds of national service members and youth participants each year in the skills needed to address these natural resource challenges.

PAST RESEARCH AND EXISTING EVIDENCE

Multiple studies exist on the impact of environmental corps programs on participants (e.g., Duerden, et al., 2013; Education Northwest, 2013). Each evaluation provided strong evidence for the impact of the corps experience on participants' environmental engagement, community engagement, teamwork, leadership, communication skills and grit. Other emerging research demonstrates the efficacy of conservation work to provide broader social, health, and economic benefits. The primary conservation activities conducted by corps are improvements to public lands and trail stewardship.

Research suggests links between land improvement activities like those conducted by corps and many long-term community and ecosystem impacts. Improving public parks and habitats is associated with increased ecosystem services, improved biodiversity, and environmental health (Benayas et al., 2009; Suding, 2011). Controlling invasive species has major financial implications for many economic sectors (Pimentel, et al., 2005) and can also positively impact outdoor recreational activities (Eiswerth, et al., 2005; Julia, et al., 2007). Conservation activities can ensure that publicly accessible ecosystems remain healthy in light of high human contact (Alessa et al., 2003). Numerous studies have also indicated how poorly constructed trails negatively influence the quality of recreation experiences and decrease visitation (Roggenbuck, et al., 1993; Vaske, et al., 1993). When trails are built and maintained properly, they have the potential to produce direct economic benefits through visitor expenditures on equipment, food, transportation, and lodging (Moore, et al., 1994).

THEORY OF CHANGE, LOGIC MODEL & OUTCOMES

Relevant to this evaluation, there are two primary long-term impacts associated with corps activities.

Narratives

First, improving public parks and habitats promotes ecosystem health. Second, improving trail conditions increases the quality of trails, leading to higher accessibility and usage and enhanced visitor experiences. While measuring the long-term impacts of these activities lie outside the scope of a program evaluation, key antecedent mechanisms will be evaluated as program outputs and outcomes. Twelve conservation corps across the country will collaborate on a 3-year evaluation led by Dr. Edwards, North Carolina State University, and Dr. Duerden, Brigham Young University.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE EVALUATION

1. Do projects focused on improving, protecting, and restoring public parks or other public and tribal lands improve visually assessed ecosystem health?
2. Do projects focused on improving or constructing trails improve the visually assessed quality of trails?

STUDY COMPONENTS

A standardized form will be used to document project outputs, including numbers of acres/miles improved and characteristics of improvements (Project Years 1-3). Improvements will also be photographed and geocoded. Using a quasi-experimental design, the following research questions will be addressed. However, in consideration of unique challenges of this environmental evaluation, MCC is requesting an alternative evaluation approach

QUESTION 1: DO PROJECTS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING AND RESTORING HABITATS IMPROVE VISUALLY ASSESSED ECOSYSTEM HEALTH?

Working with corps staff, the evaluation team will develop a visual assessment tool informed by existing instruments (e.g., Rangeland Health Evaluation Summary Worksheet [Pyke et al., 2002]). Principles of engaged evaluation (e.g., CDC, 1999), suggest developing practical tools relevant to project goals can provide more accurate and useable information. Visual assessments provide systematic moment-in-time measures of observable indicators associated with ecosystem health. Measures will focus on assessing key indicators of ecosystem health including soil erosion, species composition and mortality, and presence of organic litter. Instruments will be developed in both paper and online (via mobile application) formats. Pilot testing will occur prior to implementation (Year 2).

Projects scheduled for treatment will be the population and a census approach will be used. The

Narratives

evaluation team will provide training on the use of assessment tools and protocols to establish reliable observations (Year 2). Trained observers will assess plots at scheduled projects at the beginning (Year 3) to determine baseline levels of habitat health and again at the end of the project to determine level of improvement. Follow up observations of all plots will be used to determine maintenance of improvements.

Assessment scores will be standardized and indexed to calculate a visual health score for each plot. Pre and Post scores will be compared using repeated measures analyses (e.g., ANOVA, linear mixed models) with relevant controls. Evaluating maintenance of improvements at baseline, project completion, and follow up will be conducted using linear growth models.

QUESTION 2: DO PROJECTS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING OR CONSTRUCTING TRAILS IMPROVE THE VISUAL QUALITY OF TRAILS, INCREASE USAGE OF TRAILS, AND INCREASE VISITOR SAFETY?

Working with corps staff, the evaluation team will develop a visual trail quality assessment tool informed by existing instruments (e.g., EAPRS [Saelens, 2006], Recreation Trail Scorecard [Wilkerson & Whitman, 2009]). Measures will focus on assessing key indicators of quality linked to visitor experience and ecosystem health (e.g., presence of social trails, erosion, water/mud, hazards, and barriers). Pilot testing will occur prior to implementation (Year 1).

Projects scheduled for treatment will be the population and a census approach will be used. The evaluation team will provide trainings on the use of assessment tools and protocols to establish reliable observations (Year 1). Trained observers will assess projects at the beginning to determine baseline levels of trail segment quality and again at the end of the project to determine level of improvement (Year 1). Follow up observations of all trail segments will be conducted to determine maintenance of improvements (Year 2).

Assessment scores will be standardized and indexed to calculate a visual quality score for each project area. Pre and Post scores will be compared using repeated measures with relevant controls. Evaluating the maintenance of improvements at baseline, project completion, and follow up will be conducted using linear growth models.

Narratives

EVALUATION TEAM QUALIFICATIONS

Our evaluation team is led by co-investigators Dr. Michael Edwards of NC State University and Dr. Mat Duerden of Brigham Young University. Dr. Edwards currently serves on the evaluation team for a Community Transformation Project, funded by CDC and NC Dept. of Public Health. He is also leading a project co-funded by the CDC and National Park Service aimed at identifying metrics for the contribution of parks and trails to public health goals. Dr. Edwards has presented on evaluation methodologies at the American Evaluation Association national conference and published articles related to his evaluation work in the Journal of Adolescent Health, American Journal of Health Promotion, and Journal of School Health. Dr. Duerden has conducted evaluations for over 10 years with specific focus on youth serving agencies including non-profits and governmental organizations. He has published articles related to his evaluation work in the Journal of Environmental Psychology, Journal of Extension, Journal of Youth Development, Leisure Sciences, and Journal of Park and Recreation Administration. Drs. Edwards and Duerden have co-led multiple conservation program evaluations for the Public Lands Service Coalition, and the Corps Network since 2010.

ESTIMATED BUDGET

The evaluation budget covers a 3-year period. Costs are based on a collaborative evaluation approach that includes multiple conservation corps. Costs are shown in aggregate for implementing the full evaluation plan across all participating corps.

NC State faculty salaries: \$14,000. Includes evaluation design, supervising instrument development, creating and delivering training protocols, consulting with corps during data collection, data analysis, and reporting.

\$54,000 is included for a 3-year stipend for a doctoral-level research assistant with expertise in natural resources management to manage this project, supervise pilot testing, and coordinate training, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, \$18,279 is required for educational expenses for the GA for 3 years.

Fringe benefits (30% for faculty; 15% for GA): \$12,300 for the 3-year period.

Research expenses: \$15,000. Includes costs to field test assessment tools, develop application software

Narratives

for assessment protocols, and creative time for training modules and materials.

Travel: \$12,000. Includes 2 trips to the Corps Network Conference for project PI and GA to meet with corps and report evaluation progress and field training travel expenses.

A sub-contract with Brigham Young University is calculated at \$21,000 for 3 years. The sub-contract includes faculty time, student time, fringe benefits, and relevant travel.

Direct Costs: \$146,579

Indirect Costs at 26%: \$33,358

Total Evaluation Cost: \$179,937

Estimated MCC share: \$5,000/year ($\$5,000 \times 3 \text{ yrs} \times 12 \text{ participating corps}$)

Amendment Justification

N/A

Clarification Summary

PROGRAMMATIC CLARIFICATION ITEMS

1. Please clarify the role and service responsibilities for the Conservation Intern Cohort (22MT)

For twenty-four years, MCC has operated a crew-based program. In recent years and in response to the diverse and growing needs of project partners for environmental stewardship, MCC has diversified the crew size. Crews may be as small as 3 members for invasive species monitoring and weed control activities, or up to eight for veterans serving on forest restoration and fuels reduction projects. Also, MCC implemented in 2012 a highly effective single-site placement "intern" design with our Montana Formula-funded Big Sky Watershed Corps (BSWC).

In incorporating the Conservation Intern Cohort model into this proposal, MCC is adapting the best of single-site, VISTA-model programming piloted with the BSWC to build focused capacity for environmental stewardship, with our proven strengths of managing cohort/crew-based programming and member training.

Following their orientation as a team, the Conservation Interns will serve at host sites singly or in teams of 2-4 members. They will be placed with organizations that have identified high priority

Narratives

environmental stewardship needs, yet where the solution lends itself to an individual or a small team of AmeriCorps members. Such projects may include working with community groups like Foys to Blacktail and the local Flathead County government to develop and support a sustainable stewardship plan for new community trails, or with the Bureau of Land Management to monitor for the spread of invasive tamarisk after major floods in 2011 propagated this noxious plant throughout the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

Conservation Interns will have weekly check-ins with MCC staff, and will remain connected together as a cohort through continuing online training and other member development activities conducted together or in small groups. These practices have proven highly effective in MCC's administration of the Big Sky Watershed Corps "intern-model" program. The Conservation Interns will serve in a full-time capacity throughout the duration of their minimum-time term.

2. Please clarify in more detail the plan for member supervision

Members serving with MCC are supervised by MCC's field staff based from four regional offices -- Bozeman, Helena, Kalispell, and Missoula. Our regional staffing structure includes 2-3 Field Coordinators, a Youth Program Coordinator, and a Program Manager, all under the supervision of a Regional Director. This staff supervises five to seven young adult field crews and three youth crews, with each crew led by two MCC-trained AmeriCorps team leaders. This leadership training occurs in February, March and April when much of Montana's public lands are inaccessible due to winter conditions. In addition to the hands-on training, the effectiveness of MCC's supervision model includes weekly briefings, daily reporting in a crew log and in-person debriefings following every hitch, communication protocols that ensure 24/7 access to full-time MCC staff, our in-house Public Lands and Civic Engagement curriculum, industry-leading risk management practices, and a culture that fosters productive crew dynamics. Every crew receives is regularly visited by the Field Coordinators who are available to provide technical guidance on projects, to mentor the leaders, and address any disciplinary or supervisory issues. MCC has in place practices to ensure AmeriCorps members do not supervise other members, yet we aim to provide a challenging and rewarding team leadership experience for the crew leaders, and the corps members themselves. Again, the regional structure ensures all crews are accessible despite the vast geography of Montana and the Northern Rockies.

This model efficiently leverages the knowledge and mentoring of seasoned and professional staff while

Narratives

providing excellent hands-on training opportunities for emerging leaders and the corps members. Serving as an MCC AmeriCorps crew leader is a sought after opportunity for many NCCC alums, members who previously served at other corps, and returning MCC corps member continuing with a second year of service.

MCC pioneered this model of staff supervision and crew leadership in 1998. Due to the quality of training and supervision, and demonstrated results of competent leaders, MCC's programs and practices are widely respected in the national corps community, and our alumni are sought after for staff positions with other corps, federal agencies, and diverse nonprofits like the Montana Wilderness Association and Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation.

3. Please confirm that 70 MT members will serve in a full-time capacity

All MCC AmeriCorps members serve in a full-time capacity -- regardless of length of term. The full-time members start in February to train as crew leaders and practice team-facilitation and service skills on projects through the spring. Part-time and minimum-time members start in May (and August for the second round of Veteran Green Corps crews) and serve for three to five months in full-time capacities. Most commonly, members are out on 5 to 10 day hitches logging over 40 hours per week, with 2-4 days off in between hitches.

BUDGET CLARIFICATION

1. Application Request Consideration:

This application is being considered for less than the request. MCC has revised the executive summary, budget, and performance measures to reflect the amount of funding for which this application is under consideration (\$1,872,000.)

2. Cost per Member Service Year:

MCC proposes to lower our cost per member from \$12,463.38 in the current year, to \$12,131 for our FY16 program year. This reduction in cost per MSY will allow MCC to operate within the \$1,872,000 grant award under consideration with the addition of 4.11 No-Cost MSY to support 291 positions (154.31 MSY). See item "E. MSY with No Program Funds" for clarification.

Narratives

3. Confirm Authorized Representative:

The authorized representative has been corrected to Jono McKinney, MCC President and CEO.

4. Fixed Amount applicants should not include match in their budget

MCC has removed match from the budget and updated the "Other Revenue Field" to include all funds used to run our program.

C. PERFORMANCE MEASURE CLARIFICATION

N/A

D. STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT SLOTS

1. What percentage of your slots will be targeted to recruiting members with disabilities? What is your program's plan, if any, for outreach and recruitment of members of the disability community?

MCC enrolls a high percentage of participants with disabilities. In 2014, 28% of MCC members self-disclosed a disability on the ServeMontana Accommodations Assessment administered by the state commission. Members with developmental disabilities such as Asperger's Syndrome, members who are fully deaf, and members with learning disabilities have all found MCC a positive and supportive place to serve. Though the physical rigors of the program require that members be able to serve in remote, backcountry situations, MCC's crew dynamic is conducive to diversity and creates a highly inclusive culture that is able to provide substantial accommodations for diverse disabilities. MCC's recruitment materials emphasize that qualified individuals with disabilities and those from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to apply. MCC will continue with this practices to recruit members of the disability community.

2. Additional MSY's for individuals with disabilities

MCC is not seeking additional MSY's for members with disabilities. We will continue to recruit for diverse crews and to ensure an inclusive environment for members with diverse disabilities. In particular, the Conservation Intern positions may allow for additional service opportunities within our current requested slots for members with disabilities as certain projects sites may have less rigorous mobility requirements than is routine for the corps members serving in rugged, backcountry

Narratives

situations.

E. MSY WITH NO PROGRAM FUNDS ATTACHED CLARIFICATION

1. Number and Type of Slots Requested:

MCC requests 4.11 additional No-Cost MSY's for a total of 154.31 MSY's, 291 members (58 FT, 163 PT, 70 MT). This configuration at \$12,131 overall cost per MSY adds no additional cost to the proposed CNCS share of \$1,872,000. MCC achieves this configuration by shortening the term of 70 QT positions to 70 MT positions, and increasing the "Other Revenue Funds ". These members will engage only in activities aligned with the proposed member activities outlined in the application narrative.

2. Resources to Support Additional No-Cost MSY:

MCC will integrate the additional No-Cost MSY positions into our regular crew and conservation intern structure. MCC's member supervision structure was developed to support 291 members, and MCC has the capacity to raise additional project income to support these positions in light of the reduced cost-per-MSY. Though this is an accelerated pace to achieve the lower cost per member, this direction aligns with MCC's long term goals to sustain the AmeriCorps program.

3. Sources of Non-CNCS Funds:

MCC anticipates raising \$3,977,273 in non-CNCS funds to support the program with the additional No-Cost MSY positions. As MCC will incorporate these members into the program design to support a robust AmeriCorps resource for environmental stewardship, MCC anticipates raising the additional \$93,592 needed through fee for service projects with federal, state, and local organizations, and through grants and donations supporting program activities. MCC anticipates raising \$2,860,000 from federal project partners (NPS, BLM, USFS, etc); \$520,000 from state agencies, 377,400 from nonprofit partners, and \$219,873 in grants and donations.

4. Capability and Capacity to manage additional members:

The proposed structure with the additional No-Cost MSY's reflects MCC's proposed model for 2016. With this proposal, MCC is investing in continued growth of our program to support partner needs, and we recognize the need to develop the financial resources to support the added grantee revenue

Narratives

requirements from the reduced cost per member. MCC may capitalize on its organizational structure with 4 Regional Directors and a Director of Partnerships to develop the projects and fee-for-service revenue. MCC is also having increasing success developing grants and donations to support program activities. What is driving MCC toward this goal is the growing need for services, especially in response to the federal 21st Century Conservation Service Corps initiative.

Continuation Changes

N/A

Grant Characteristics