



Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
Tom Sykes

506 16th Avenue SE
Olympia, WA 98501-2323
Campus Mail: PO Box 40910

(360) 786-5171
FAX 786-5180
TDD 1-800-635-9993

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E-Mail: neff_ba@leg.wa.gov
Internet: <http://jlarc.leg.wa.gov>

Washington Conservation Corps Sunset Review Report 98-5

The Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) was created in 1983. It provides 18- to 25-year-old youth with work experience and skills in projects that support conservation, rehabilitation, and enhancement of the state's natural, historic, environmental, and recreational resources.

The report recommends continuation of the program with modifications. Those modifications include state agencies recommending to the legislature whether the program should target certain geographical areas or clients in the future and whether the legislature wishes to earmark funds for that purpose.

Introduction

Four agencies—Department of Ecology, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and State Parks and Recreation Commission—have implemented the program since 1993. During the last five fiscal years, these agencies have received approximately \$12.3 million for their WCC programs. Corps members are usually hired for 6 to 12 months and are paid the minimum wage.

Compliance with Legislative Intent

The four agencies involved with WCC have generally complied with legislative intent. However, a part of legislation relating to the use of funds for economically distressed areas is not clear. Ambiguity in the language leaves open the question of whether

the criteria for employing corps members from distressed areas, and funding projects in distressed areas, must be met simultaneously. As a result, it was difficult to fully assess agency compliance with legislative intent for the use of such funds.

Effectiveness

The program has been implemented in an effective manner to the extent it has provided WCC crews opportunities to do conservation, rehabilitation, and enhancement work of the state's natural, historic, environmental, and recreational resources. However, necessary data are not available to assess the impact of WCC in developing the state's youth resources through meaningful work experience and training, as well as its efforts relating to economically distressed areas.

Before establishing a system to collect such data, the four agencies should first do a cost-benefit analysis of alternatives for assessing program impacts. Policymakers and program managers could then use the results of the cost-benefit analysis to decide which, if any, outcome measures are appropriate and would add value to the program.

Cost-Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Duplication

Overall, WCC has been implemented in a cost-effective manner. However, in some cases, the program needs to improve data management and monitoring of its projects and activities. Furthermore, the program has not conducted a formal assessment of current needs relating to the program's role in economically

distressed areas. Finally, although similar programs exist in the public sector, WCC does not appear to unnecessarily duplicate efforts of other public agencies or the private sector.

Is the Program Still Needed?

The report concludes that the program is needed and should be continued. However, it is not clear whether the original targeting of resources to economically distressed areas is still needed. Therefore, the report suggests that the implementing agencies inform the legislature before the 1999 Legislative Session regarding the need for any type of targeting of WCC resources in the future. The legislature may assess those recommendations in considering the reauthorization of WCC. Agencies and the Office of Financial Management generally concur with the recommendations.

Recommendations

1. The legislature should continue the Washington Conservation Corps with modifications indicated in Recommendations 2 through 5 of this report.
2. Ecology, Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and State Parks should establish a cost-effective performance measurement system for the Washington Conservation Corps, consistent with the requirements of the Budget and Accounting Act (Chapter 43.88 RCW).
3. Ecology, Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and State Parks should conduct an assessment of needs for the Washington Conservation Corps and make a recommendation to the legislature before the 1999 Legislative Session whether program resources should be targeted in the future.
4. Based on the outcome of Recommendation 3, the legislature should consider whether to dedicate any portion of the general fund appropriation for the Washington Conservation Corps for targeted areas or populations. If such targeting is desired, agencies should establish a process to track those expenditures in order to demonstrate compliance with legislative intent.
5. Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources, and State Parks should establish a reliable database (similar to Ecology's) that will allow Washington Conservation Corps program information to be used for effective management decision-making.