

Grant Continuation Report from Task Force

Recommendation: Recommend authorization with corrections and a condition.

Legal Applicant: Dept. of Agriculture,
Conservation, and Forestry

Program Name: Maine Conservation Corps

Category: ☐ AC Formula
☒ AC Competitive
☐ Other Competition

Type: ☐ Planning
☐ Operating
☒ Fixed Amount
☐ Ed Award Only

Year in Grant Cycle: ☐ Year 1 ☒ Year 2 ☐ Year 3

Continuation Dates: Start: 1/1/2023
End: 12/31/2023

New Resources for Continuation: Funds and Slots

NOTE: Fixed Amount grants do not submit full budgets. They only request slots and AmeriCorps funds. No financial reporting is required of these grants.

	CNCS	Local Share	+ 12.6% Note: ARP increased living allowance, moving it toward equivalent of min. wage. This increase reflects that change.					
Operating								
Member Support								
Indirect (Admin)								
Total	\$ 894,240	n/a						
% sharing proposed								
% share required	n/a							
Cost-per-member proposed (max allowed)	\$21,600 (\$21,600)							
Total AmeriCorps Member Service Years:		Slot Types Requested						
		FT	HT	RHT	QT	MT		Total
Slots With living allowance		10	22	48	8			88
Slots with only ed award								

Conditions to be met before submission to CNCS:

- Set Performance Targets for stewardship slots.
- Commission staff to renegotiate targets for submitted measures so the targets are reasonable.
- Identify service activities of Environmental Stewards and Field Teams more clearly in Executive Summary.
- Report back on field team projects for 2022 by March 30, 2022 as evidence 2023 field team slots are needed. (Even pre-COVID, the number of unfilled positions for shorter terms was significant.)

Program Description (executive summary from grant application):

The Maine Conservation Corps proposes to have 88 AmeriCorps members who will accrue marketable skills and experiences, while completing vital environmental stewardship activities, including but not limited to: trail rehabilitation and construction, aquatic and terrestrial habitat restoration and monitoring, and environmental education programming in all of Maine's 16 counties. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for treating or constructing 200 miles of trail. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage 600 community volunteers who will be engaged in skill development activities to perpetuate the stewardship efforts of members. This program will concentrate on the CNCS focus area of Environmental Stewardship. The CNCS investment of \$894,240 will leverage \$1,056,397, \$668,567 in public funding and \$387,830 in private funding.

[Note: Conservation Corps does not reference the efforts of the Environmental Stewards in this description and, yet, they outnumber the field team slots. MCC has been instructed to fix their performance measures to capture the efforts of the Stewards. They will be directed to fix the Exec Summary as well. Not doing this was a Commission staff oversight last year.]

Service locations (new sites are italicized):

- Biodiversity Research Institute
- BP & L Vaughan Woods Memorial State Park
- BP&L Bradbury Mountain State Park
- BP&L Bradbury/Mackworth State Parks
- BP&L Lily Bay State Park
- BP&L Sebago Lake State Park
- BP&L Wolfes Neck Woods State Park
- BP&PL Mt Blue State Park
- Coastal Mountains Land Trust
- Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District
- DEP Augusta Biological Monitoring Unit
- DEP NonPoint Source Pollution
- DEP Portland Biological Monitor
- Maine DEP Healthy Beaches
- Maine Board of Pesticides
- Maine Natural Areas Program
- City of Portland
- City of South Portland
- Downeast Coastal Conservancy
- Downeast Institute for Applied Marine Science and Education
- Frenchman Bay Conservancy
- Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument
- Knox-Lincoln Soil and Water Conservation District
- LWCF Legacy Project
- Maine Conservation Corps
- Maine Conservation Corps Field Team
- Midcoast Conservancy (Community)
- Midcoast Conservancy (Land)
- Midcoast Conservancy (Water)
- Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust
- The Nature Conservancy

Performance measures (targets and achievement for prior years; targets proposed for new year):

Measure	Year 1 Target	Year 1 to-date Accomplished	Year 2 Target (new year)
OUTPUT: EN5: Miles of trails or rivers treated	200	80.78	200
Outcome: EN5.1: Miles of trails or rivers improved	180	50.61	180
Output: M1: Number of AmeriCorps program training and other formal development activities that result in increased AmeriCorps member skills, knowledge and abilities related to service assignment	5	5	*
Outcome: M2: Number of AmeriCorps members demonstrating increased competency in skills or application of knowledge	50	44	*
G3-3.3: Number of organizations fully implementing three or more new effective volunteer management practices as a result of capacity building services provided by AmeriCorps members or program	20	1	*
Output: Number of volunteers recruited or managed		119	600
Output: Number of hours served by recruited or managed volunteers		433.25	

*These targets are set after federal award but before state grant is issued. They are Commission required performance measures focused on Member development and growth as a result of service and strengthening the host sites. CNCS stopped assessing these elements a number of years ago.

Operating performance summary:

Enrollment/retention.

RECRUITMENT/ENROLLMENT – use of positions awarded to program for the program year

Service Term	Awarded slots	Used Slots	% of enrollment
Full Time (1700)	10	8	80%
Three-Quarter Time (1200)	0	0	
One Year Half Time (900)	19	19	100%
Reduced Half Time (675)	58	21	36%
Quarter Time (450)	11	10	91%
Minimum Time (300)	22	11	50%
<i>Overall</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>57.5%</i>

The federal minimum acceptable fill rate is 100% so Conservation Corps' overall enrollment rate is far short of the requirement. On closer look, the enrollment is strong for Environmental Stewards and Trail Team leaders who serve longer terms. What pulled them down was enrollment of field team members. This pattern is close to the 2020 year. In its progress reports, MCC states the low enrollment is a result of fewer projects for summer field teams. This occurred because the private land trusts and others did not have the funding to pay the MCC rates – the corps relies heavily on a fee-for-service model to obtain the grantee share for operations. As their proposed budget shows, a host for a 6-person field team would have to pay \$4,150/week for the duration of a project. Three-person teams go for \$2,625; Environmental Stewards who serve a year go for \$15,500 and halftime Stewards go for \$11,000. They also charge \$300 for each project plan they help develop. The pandemic impact on nonprofits – especially those dependent on donors – has highlighted MCC's dependence on fees and the relationship between recruitment and this funding model. There is a question to be asked, however, because in the pre-pandemic first year of this grant cycle only 6 of 16 sites were non-governmental organizations and, in the year now ending, 5 of 16 sites are NGOs.

RETENTION – keeping members engaged once they are enrolled. The federal minimum acceptable fill rate is 85%

Service Term	Filled slots	Left early	Successfully completed	% retained
Full Time (1700)	8	1	7	87.5%
Three-Quarter Time (1200)	0	0	0	100%
One Year Half Time (900)	19	1	18	94.7%
Reduced Half Time (675)	21	5	16	90.5%
Quarter Time (450)	10	1	9	76%
Minimum Time (300)	11	0	11	100%
<i>Overall</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>88.4%</i>

As the data shows, Conservation Corps systems to support members and keep them engaged are adequate for most members. For comparison, this is 2019 – the only year not impacted by the pandemic.

Service Term	Filled slots	Left early	Successfully completed	% retained
Full Time (1700)	10 of 10	1	9	90%
Three-Quarter Time (1200)	0	0		
One Year Half Time (900)	17 of 17	2	15	88%
Reduced Half Time (675)	49 of 49	10	39	79%
Quarter Time (450)	12 of 21	0	12	100%
Minimum Time (300)	10 of 32	0	10	100%
<i>Overall</i>	<i>98 of 128</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>86.7%</i>

Compliance:

» Program operation

The program operation was nearly shut down in 2020 but revived in 2021. During the pandemic suspension, there was significant change in staff but not in leadership. Those who remained used the time to retool portions of the operation so health and safety issues would not stand in the way of the 2021 operation. There were no instances of noncompliance or a need for corrective action.

» Member management

Review of records confirmed strong systems and no corrective actions were required.

» Program Finances and Agency Fiscal Issues

The program applied for CARES funding in DACF but was denied. The AmeriCorps federal agency did not treat competitive programs the same when it came to ARP increases. Thus, MCC was confined to receiving only enough funds to increase the living allowance but not associated benefit costs (FICA, etc.) or match replacement. The program reports it is planning to leave all vacancies unfilled in 2022. Their direct support from the state (General Fund) appears to be about 8% of the cash expenses and the AmeriCorps request would be 85% of operating cash expenses. For comparison to the last pre-pandemic year (2019), the total program budget was 27% larger, General Fund support was 7% and AmeriCorps funds were 49%.

Since a chart may be easier to follow when trying to assess changes in budgets, the one below depicts 4 years – one pre-pandemic, the two during pandemic, and the budget proposed in the continuation before you.

Sources of funds	Current Grant		Last grant - 1 pre-pandemic year and 1 pandemic year	
	Application	2021 (now ending)	2020	2019
Large field teams	634,950	634,950	813,450	813,450
Small field teams	44,625	44,625	46,750	46,750
1700-hour stewards	155,000	155,000	155,000	155,000
900-hour stewards	132,000	132,000	225,000	225,000
Project plan fees	3,000	3,000	10,800	10,800
Partner in-kind			109,993	109,993
General fund	86,822	86,822	91,779	91,779
AmeriCorps request	894,240	784,504	660,224	660,224
Cost per member claimed	21,600	18,949	13,429	13,430
Max CPM allowed	21,600	21,600	15,479	15,192

While funding levels are of concern for a program that is expected to play a major role in natural resource responses to climate, the financial management is rock solid. MCC is one of 2 subgrantees covered by the 3-year OIG audit. In the report of findings issued in January 2021, MCC had no findings of any sort.

Task Force Comments:

BUDGET REQUEST

- Less than 85% of positions, less than 900 hours, were filled, so amount should be reduced.
- The project budget seems to be in line with expectations and MCC has demonstrated good financial management practices.

- Recommend that their request for a modest increase for living allowances is realized.
- See below since this is tied to the number of slots

POSITION/SLOTS REQUESTED

- Not filling member slots was directly attributed to land trusts not being able to contribute their share due to financial constraints during the pandemic. The economy is in a good place, nonprofits have had a much stronger year and there is no reason to believe this will be the case in the coming year.
- Less than 85% of positions, less than 900 hours, were filled, so # of members should be reduced.
- Overall recruitment has been under 60% of awarded slots.
- The program used less than 60% of its slots this year due to a lack of NGO project demands. The largest slot category unfilled was for reduced half time. If MCC can make a case for anticipating a larger number of needed project teams this year, I would be open to fully funding their request.

PERFORMANCE TARGETS

- It appears that some targets need to be decreased (miles of trails or rivers treated and improved) and other increased (no of volunteers recruited and hours served by volunteers) to come closer to the actual outcome.
- With fewer members than the original proposal, the target should be reduced.
- While trail treatment and trail improvement targets have not been met, the impact of COVID on this work is unclear. It is also unclear if there is a plan to address the deficiency in performance measures. A reduction in MSY should be reflected in proposed performance measures.
- As noted in the staff report, we had requested performance targets for the program's stewardship slots; apparently, this was not communicated to them. It should be added for the coming year.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

- Operations were successful and most expectations were met.
- This is a good program – keep operating plans, with slight reduction in budget, members, and target.
- It is implied from the application and staff review that MCC is taking steps to remediate some of the issues that have led them to be less successful than hoped. With a modified performance measures and another year of volunteer development, it is promising they could succeed.
- As noted, many positions went unfilled for the year given lack of adequate project demand likely related to the pandemic's impact on NGO operations. I would be interested in seeing prior year information and hearing what MCC is anticipating for the coming year. As noted, with justification I would be happy to recommend the positions requested.