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The Citizen Climate Corps has roots in past crises

BY: **AVERY ELLFELDT** | 01/28/2021 06:51 AM EST

Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps pause for a photo in this 1939 image. President Biden's new Civilian Climate Corps is based loosely on the Franklin D. Roosevelt-era program. | Richard/Flickr

CLIMATEWIRE | President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps. President John F. Kennedy launched the Peace Corps. And now President Joseph R. Biden has the Civilian Climate Corps — the latest in a long line of Oval Office efforts designed to marshal young Americans to solve big problems.

Biden unveiled the program yesterday as part of a sweeping package of climate-related executive orders. Similar in scope to its Great Depression and Cold War predecessors, this one seeks to hire a "new generation of Americans" to tackle global warming and kick-start the U.S. economy.

Few details about the program have been released. But the administration made clear yesterday that the effort aims to generate well-paying jobs while also restoring public lands, increasing carbon sequestration, slashing emissions and helping communities adapt to rising temperatures.

According to the executive order, the heads of the Interior, Agriculture and other relevant departments have 90 days to submit a plan to "mobilize the next generation of conservation and resilience workers and maximize the creation of accessible training opportunities and good jobs."

That's a huge deal, proponents argue, given intensifying climate impacts, the ongoing health crisis and a monthslong economic downturn that's left millions of Americans without work.

The Biden administration did not respond to a request for additional details, including how many corps members would be hired or how much they would be paid.

But in the eyes of Jeremy Brecher, a co-founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability, "this has the potential to make available hundreds of thousands, if not millions of jobs for the people who need [them]."

Biden's new program is reminiscent of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era initiative that Roosevelt established in 1933 via an executive order.

Throughout the program's nine-year life span, it employed roughly 3 million men, most of whom were between the ages of 18 and 25. The corps members' work included planting millions of trees, fighting forest fires, and further developing state and national parks.

While the original program — which was a collaboration involving the Labor, Agriculture, Interior and War departments — zeroed in on conservation, the modern-day iteration aims to address climate change and environmental injustice specifically.

According to the [environmental platform](#) that Biden touted while on the campaign trail, participants could undertake a sprawling range of jobs that would help U.S. communities curb — and adapt to — global warming.

That could entail working to make forests more resilient to wildfires, while also increasing their ability to absorb carbon from the atmosphere. Similarly, jobs focused on restoring wetlands could help preserve clean water supplies and offer nearby communities enhanced protection from flooding.

An initiative to plant millions of trees, meanwhile, would mitigate heat stress in urban neighborhoods. Improved recreational trails and landscapes could serve as a boon to local economies and the climate in regions such as the Great Lakes and the Everglades.

Those jobs, Biden's environmental platform made clear, won't mirror the discrimination of Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. It's designed to put "good-paying union jobs within reach for more Americans, including women and people of color."

The initiative's focus on equity and racial justice is an important departure from the New Deal-era conservation corps, which is known for creating segregated work camps, preventing Black Americans from rising in the ranks and, in some Southern states, explicitly excluding Black people from participating at all.

Roosevelt's program also has been criticized for capping the enrollment of Black Americans at 10% of total recruits. According to the Living New Deal, a research and educational organization, that limit matched the percentage of Black Americans in the total population — but was "nowhere near proportional to the number of [Black people] eligible for relief during the Depression."

The "devil is in the details" when it comes to the program's potential success, said Brecher, of the Labor Network for Sustainability.

But he added that implementing rigorous diversity standards for the recruitment process, creating robust program oversight and ensuring a \$15 minimum wage for corps members would be a good start.



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