

Program Highlight: Oregon Conservation Corps

By Kayla Seaforth, BEF

The Oregon Conservation Corps funding program was created through Senate Bill 762 in response to the 2020 fires that burned over 1 million acres, destroyed 4000 homes, and cost the state \$84 million, according to the Oregon Department of Forestry. Now, four years removed from this devastating wildfire season, the program's funding is under threat.

In a model that relies on the expertise and priorities of implementation organizations, the Oregon Conservation Corps (OCC) has been a huge boost to fire resilience work in Oregon since its inaugural year in 2022. OCC is operated by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission of Oregon (HECC) as a grant program that organizations can apply to for funding for fire resilience and job training activities. Funding allows these Tribal organizations, non-profits, and agencies to hire and train crews, purchase tools and equipment, and provide wrap-around support services to crew members. All of this supports the broader goal of increasing fire resilience among Oregon communities, while providing valuable job training skills to youth, defined by this program as ages 16 to 26.

"I have more stability, I have my own place now and consistent checks help a lot with that," one participant said. "I became more responsible after I got on the crew."

– Youth participant, enrolled citizen of The Klamath Tribes

While this program has not been around long, it has already made a large impact on the communities it supports. The partners who employ crews supported by OCC prioritize work in areas that will improve resilience among elders, individuals with disabilities, veterans, and other vulnerable populations. Crew members are often members of vulnerable populations as well, and this work provides valuable income and training. Members have reported experiencing economic hardship, skills gaps for employment, and academic gaps for employment. In addition to these more common barriers, 17% of participants self-report living with disabilities, 13% self-report experiences with the justice system, 11% self-reported as identifying as LGBTQIA2S+, and another 11% self-reported barriers related to being unhoused. These barriers are intersectional and complex, and the support that the participants need and receive is highly individualized. OCC provides more than just job training, it can also serve as a community for youth, and a resource for support services.

"It's amazing to see. Yes, it is jobs for these kids, but it is also peace of mind for the people who live here."

– Robert Swan, Community Services Consortium Program Coordinator

Because OCC is run as a grant program, it allows things like crew structure, training opportunities, and work plans to be driven by the needs and priorities of the organizations that implement projects.



Photo Credit: Central Oregon Wildfire Workforce Partnership

2023-24 Program Achievements



3820+ acres
treated across 235 sites

360
homes and businesses impacted

51
Oregon zip codes served

10.5 acres
treated per day

264
program participants

Example Crew Models:

LOMAKATSI RESTORATION PROJECT:

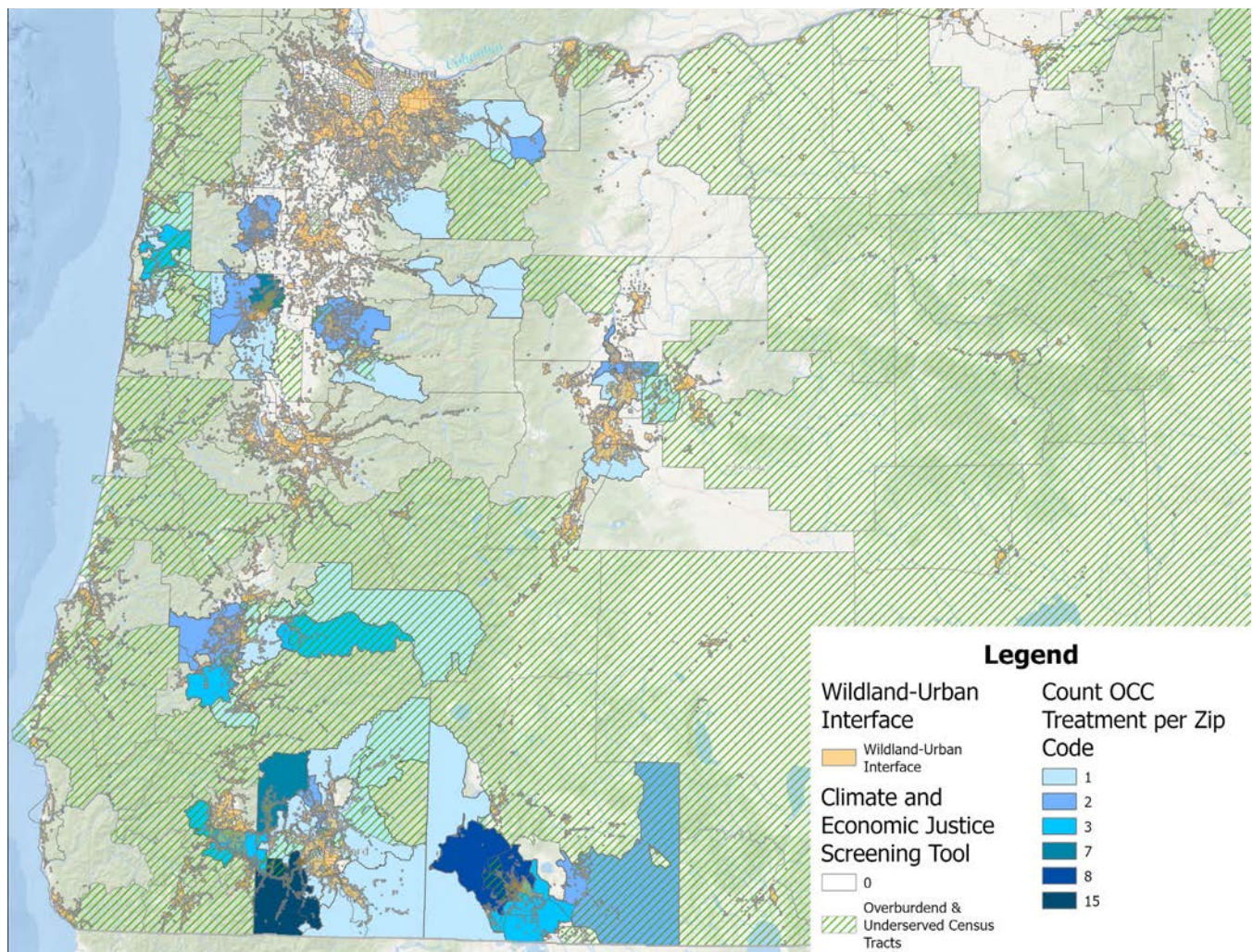
Lomakatsi has two specific crew types funded through Oregon Conservation Corps. One inter-tribal crew and one Rogue Valley crew. These crew also work on mutual projects. Youth participants are local, they may participate in the program for 1+ years, and they do large scale treatments to protect infrastructure and create community resource buffers. 22 youth were employed in the last year, average age 23. Work occurred at 64 sites, completing over 3300 acres of treatments. To read more about the work Lomakatsi has achieved through their Youth Ecological Forestry Training Program, click [here](#).

COMMUNITY SERVICES CONSORTIUM:

CSC has a number of crews. These participants are local and have independent housing and can serve for over a year or more. CSC work focuses primarily on HIZ (Home Ignition Zone) treatments. They also do projects with local land trusts and other agencies. 21 youth were employed in the last year, average age 18. Crews worked at 60 sites, completing over 130 footprint acres of treatments.

CENTRAL OREGON INTERGOVERNMENTAL COUNCIL (COIC)/ HEART OF OREGON CORPS (HOC):

COIC/HOC operate rotating crew-based models, often taking youth participants on strike crews (providing housing/ away from their home-base). Their crews serve 18-week periods. Many of HOC crew members are co-enrolled in AmeriCorps to receive additional benefits and increase collective impact. Most treatments focus on HIZ, with some strategic treatment lines to buffer communities. 155 youth were employed in the last year, average age 19. Crews worked at 27 sites, completing 121 acres of treatments.



Treatments carried out by Oregon Conservation Corps funded crews over the last year, represented at the zip code level and compared to Oregon's wildland urban interface area and census tracts determined to be overburdened or underserved by the Federal Council on Environmental Quality, who publishes the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool data.

“Funding through OCC has allowed our program to address a critical need in Central Oregon to reduce the risk of wildfire in communities across the region. The program has also increased opportunities for young people in our program to gain valuable technical skills, make a tangible impact on their communities and learn more about fire and forestry related careers. The funding has also provided the opportunity for HOC and COIC to pool resources and expand training opportunities that have not previously been possible, as well as building a strong relationship with the Oregon Department of Forestry.”

- Adult Staff

Funding for OCC was initially appropriated by the legislature in 2021 and renewed 2023, but with a new biennium on the horizon, the path to funding the next two years of programming is highly uncertain. As a program nested within the Higher Education Coordinating Commission of Oregon, the OCC relies on inclusion in the agency’s budget to be fully funded each biennium, a standard process for state agencies. Due to budget constraints from the Governor’s office, HECC did not include OCC in its budget request,

leaving the future of the program in the hands of individual legislators or the governor, who can request that it be funded in later budget review sessions.

“I know way more now than I ever thought I would about fire ecology and how to adapt to new things—it was like a light switch, almost—learning how to adapt to new places and experiences,” a participant said. “It has opened my eyes to so many more positions in the workforce.”

- Youth participant

OCC funding is supplemented by **private donations**, but it is not enough to sustain their impactful work. Program staff are seeking additional agreements with federal agencies to provide continuous funding, however this is in no way guaranteed.

The current situation the OCC is facing is all too common in workforce programs. A disaster or other highly impactful event happens, prompting ‘bold’ and ‘swift’ action. Promises are made to change systems, but once the memory of the event fades, funding evaporates and the system returns to its pre-disaster norm. Climate change is affecting our

communities and ecosystems in so many ways, and short term infusions of funding do not sustain needed changes over time. Ongoing support for programs like the OCC allows them to grow and respond to evolving needs, build trust with communities, and achieve impressive outcomes.

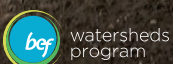
“This program was an answer to our prayers. My husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given a year to live. We were so glad to have this program help us with our property. I especially enjoyed the young people who were working so hard. This was giving them some much-valued work experience. It certainly helped us out and made us feel safer. It will also help our community get things under control in our area. We are very grateful.”

- Karen Shannon, Deschutes County

Massive Federal cuts **announced in October 2024** will eliminate Forest Service seasonal staff, reducing capacity to provide essential conservation and biodiversity work. This reduction underscores the critical need for stable, long term funding of local and state crews.



Photo Credit: Central Oregon Wildfire Workforce Partnership



Actions to Support the OCC:

- 1 Call upon Oregon legislators and Governor Kotek to fund the OCC program budget
- 2 Make a **donation** to directly support the OCC
- 3 Share this article with your network to spread awareness
- 4 **Endorse the Corps** to help tell the story of this program