

Testimony on 2017 Senate Bill 648

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy - January 4, 2018

Thank you, committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2017 Senate Bill 648. This bill will reestablish the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, a program which will protect, enhance and provide access to Wisconsin's natural heritage, and encourage and enable young people to learn the value of work in a natural setting by providing employment training and career pathways.

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) was active from 1983 to 2003, during which time hundreds of young adults completed projects throughout Wisconsin with local, state, federal and nonprofit groups. Senate Bill 648 revives the WCC. Under this bill, work crews, led by a crew leader, would make up the WCC. Work crews would consist of members between the ages of 16 and 25, and at least 50% of the work crew members must come from an impoverished background and have no college education. This program would be funded through a match with, if approved, 50% or greater of the funding coming from the National and Community Service Board, and the remaining funds coming from the project sponsor. If the project sponsor is a state agency, the agency would transfer the funds to DOA for the execution of the project, and the transfer would go before the Joint Finance Committee for a passive review. These young adults would work on projects on public lands to enhance the conservation or enjoyment of natural resources, and serve those who use the public lands. Some of the projects that may be completed under this bill include:

- Boundary marking, fencing, landscaping, or recreational site maintenance;
- Invasive species management or rain garden installation;
- Lake or stream restoration, stream bank stabilization, or erosion control;
- Reforestation, timber stand improvement, or prairie restoration, and;
- Trail construction or rehabilitation, or bridge or boardwalk construction.

Countless projects on public lands are yet to be completed due to a lack of available funding or manpower. Senate Bill 648 will cut into this backlog, making necessary updates on public lands throughout the state. The projects completed by the Wisconsin Conservation Corps would be a huge benefit to the state's natural resources and wildlife, and the residents and tourists who spend time on public lands. The young adults completing these projects would have memorable outdoors experiences while gaining a new respect for our state's natural resources. Furthermore, Senate Bill 648 will help teach young adults many of the job and life skills they need build a productive path for their future.



Jeff Mursau

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 36TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

SB 648 – Establishing WI Conservation Corps

January 4, 2018

Chairman Cowles and Committee Members –

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 648, which would reestablish the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) program. This program operated in Wisconsin from 1983-2003, before it was eliminated as part of necessary budget cuts to fix a billion budget deficit.

The program has always had bipartisan support, which is evident by the current list of cosponsors on the bill today. I was fortunate to chair the Assembly Committee that heard the bill last session. I was able to hear firsthand the positive impact the program had on individuals who came from difficult backgrounds. It provided them with educational opportunities and practical work-training that later benefited them in gaining meaningful employment. Some of those benefits included: preparing for the high school equivalency exam and/or college entrance exam and employment planning such as: preparing a resume, job searches, practicing for job interviews, etc.

We are blessed in Wisconsin to have beautiful state parks that attract visitors from all over. In FY 2016, the DNR estimated that our state park system attracted roughly 17 million visitors, which contributed more than \$1 billion annually to the state's economy. Maintaining our public lands to the high standards we've set requires a great deal of upkeep and unfortunately we're starting to fall behind. I'm sure all of us can share a story of work that needs to be done in our own districts. Reestablishing the WCC would be a win-win for all involved. We'd be opening the door for youth to get important work skills and we'd be able to make necessary improvements on our public lands.

We recently met with folks from Americorp and current non-profit corps organizations who have shared possible changes to the bill that could improve the administration process of the proposed program. We're certainly open to any suggestions that could make the program as effective, efficient, and rewarding for everyone as possible.

I appreciate that Rep. Mason asked me to join him in introducing the bill this session. I'm equally thankful for my co-author Senator Cowles who is leading the effort in the senate. I'm hopeful, with this committee's support, we can get the bill passed this session.

Once again, thank you for your consideration of SB 648 and allowing me to testify before you today.