

**Statement of Chad Calvert
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U.S. Department of the Interior
on**

S.2253, Healthy Forest Youth Conservation Corps

**Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**

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I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Department's views on S.2253, which would establish a Healthy Forest Youth Conservation Corps to be comprised of low-income young adults between the ages of 16 and 25 to work on projects to prevent fire and suppress fires, and provide disaster relief on public land. In introducing this legislation, Chairman Domenici said, "*for years, we have been working to find better ways of improving forest health so we can try to avoid the catastrophic fires that have ruined millions of acres. Allowing youth corps to be more proactive in healthy forest work is something we should have already done. There are multiple benefits for the kids and also for the ultimate goal of making our forests safer.*" We agree. However, we are opposed to including youth between the ages of 16 to 18 in fire suppression or other hazardous programs as S.2253 would authorize. If S. 2253 were amended to address our concerns, the Department would support the bill.

In many respects, the goals of S.2253 are consistent with existing authorities that this Department has supported, including the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) [P.L.108-208]. We greatly appreciate the swift action by the Congress in passing HFRA, which gives the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service additional tools to reduce the risk of severe wildland fires and restore forest and rangeland health.

S.2253 authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to enter into contracts or cooperative agreements with existing state, local, and non-profit youth conservation corps, or state natural resources, agriculture, or forestry departments, to carry out projects to prevent fire and suppress fires, rehabilitate public lands affected or altered by fires, and provide disaster relief. The bill directs the Secretaries to give priority to certain projects, including those that will: (1) reduce hazardous fuels on public lands; (2) restore public lands affected or threatened by disease or insect infestation; (3) rehabilitate public lands affected or altered by fires; (4) assess public lands at a high risk of reburn; and (5) address public lands located near a municipal watershed and water supply. The concept behind S.2253 is consistent with existing authorities, including the Youth Conservation Corps [16 U.S.C. 1701] and the Public Lands Corps [16 USC 1721]. That is, providing youth with opportunities for meaningful educational and work experiences on public lands. The bill's direction of project priorities is consistent with priorities set out in the HFRA and the Healthy Forests Initiative.

As stated earlier, however, we are opposed to including youth aged 16 to 18 in the programs authorized by S.2253. The wildland fire suppression and forest and watershed restoration work authorized to be performed under S.2253 are often hazardous duties that preclude people in this age group because of the inherently dangerous nature of these duties and the threats posed to personal safety. The Administration has concerns about the Committee's expectations regarding the authorization of specific appropriations contained in the bill given current and future funding constraints.

Regarding wildland fire suppression, the five Federal fire agencies at the National Interagency Fire Center emphasize that while some states allow individuals under the age of 18 to perform hazardous fire suppression duties on the fire line, this practice is not allowed under Federal fire agency policy or regulation. Firefighting is an arduous and a dangerous job that requires a commensurate level of maturity, decision-making capability, and perspective to perform safely. In August 2003, the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service each established the policy that persons under the age of 18 years old will not perform hazardous or arduous duties during wildland fire management operations on Federal

lands, even when the minors are supervised by states or other entities. While minors are not employed in hazardous fire-line positions, the policy does allow them to perform fire prevention, support, logistical, or other duties away from the fire-line—activities which, if performed under agreements with existing state, local, and non-profit youth conservation corps, are consistent with S.2253.

Similarly, hazardous fuels reduction treatments or restoration activities require operating power equipment such as chainsaws, brushsaws, or using prescribed fire. This is also extremely hazardous work, frequently performed on steep terrain. Accordingly, these activities fall within the established policy that precludes using minors to perform such hazardous and arduous duties.

We support the goals of S. 2253 and would support this bill if amended to address our concerns.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing. I would be glad to answer any questions.