



## Leveraging National Service to Implement the US Department of Agriculture's Inflation Reduction Act Priorities

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) made major investments in climate resilience and mitigation efforts at USDA, specifically around programs which aim to accelerate the clean energy transition in rural areas, support conservation and wildfire prevention efforts on federal and private lands, and promote greening in urban areas. National service has a long and successful [history](#) of accomplishing conservation priorities on federal lands, beginning with the Civilian Conservation Corps under the New Deal and continuing through today's modern [network](#) of service and conservation corps.

In determining how national service can help to accomplish goals stemming from this recent legislation, USDA should think creatively about how to not only expand upon successful existing national service partnerships at USFS, but also to build new ones at Rural Development to advance the Biden Administration's broader climate goals.

Investing in national service as a method to accomplish IRA priorities is a win-win for the agency, supporting successful implementation of IRA programs and simultaneously building career pathways to support USDA's federal hiring needs. Other federal entities like FEMA have long deployed national service corps members to meet their human capacity needs after federally-declared disasters, intentionally designing post-service on-ramps to civil service opportunities at FEMA. With IRA resources, USDA is well positioned to design a similar model, reaping short- and long-term benefits of national service partnerships. A new collaboration between USDA and AmeriCorps to support the Department's IRA priorities could be initiated without the need for additional congressional authorization, similar to other interagency partnerships like FEMA Corps and HUD's Promise Zone and Opportunity Zone initiatives. USDA could also consider leveraging technology infrastructure to better support their national service members during and after service, to drive them towards career opportunities with the agency post-service.

This memo, based on Service Year Alliance's recent public comment, outlines how USDA could help to spearhead efforts to stand up a Civilian Climate Corps leveraging IRA resources, by building out service partnerships in new Rural Development clean energy programs; expanding upon existing wildfire prevention and conservation efforts in the National Forest System; and scaling up environmental justice urban forestry service programs. The report also outlines

recommended next steps for agency action and the role of White House leadership to capitalize on this opportunity.

### Rural Development: Building Capacity for Energy Transition through National Service

Under the Inflation Reduction Act, USDA/RD is tasked with supporting renewable energy transition efforts through several existing programmatic accounts including through Rural Utilities Service (RUS), Rural Energy for America (REAP), and assistance for Rural Electric Cooperatives. The agency also received administrative resources to implement these priorities.

#### *Rural Utilities Service (RUS)*

There is some overlap in eligible entities for IRA Sec. 22001 RUS loans and for federal AmeriCorps grants, given that most municipal, cooperative, and tribal utilities operate in a public or nonprofit capacity. In this sense, USDA could encourage or incentivize public/nonprofit RUS loan applicants to partner with national service programs and their state service commission to bolster their application. Corps members embedded at public/nonprofit loan recipients could provide additional capacity, specifically on coordination, outreach, community engagement and awareness efforts in the pursuit of clean energy transitions. Per AmeriCorps statute, they could not replace the positions or work of employees at loan recipients, but could serve in roles that would enhance or expand the abilities of these organizations.

#### *Rural Energy for America (REAP)*

Similarly, Rural Energy for America Program grants funded through IRA Sec. 22002 support public and nonprofit entities to perform energy audits and renewable energy planning projects. National service corps members, particularly AmeriCorps State & National or AmeriCorps VISTA members, could be useful in coordinating and organizing these energy audit efforts. However, it will be important to clarify with AmeriCorps the stipulations around how these energy audits inform agricultural producers and rural small businesses to determine next courses of action, but do not necessarily provide them with direct benefit, as prohibited by AmeriCorps [authorizing statute](#). It is our understanding that because public and nonprofit entities perform REAP energy audits, it is allowable to incorporate AmeriCorps members in outreach, coordination, and other capacity-building roles. The [Home Energy Initiative](#), created by the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Serve Minnesota commission, and Ampact, is an excellent example of how national service corps members can support these types of energy audits on the ground, and highlights how existing home weatherization service year programs could be expanded to serve rural small businesses and agricultural producers as outlined in IRA. To learn more about the Minnesota example of how state energy agencies are partnering with AmeriCorps programs, please refer to Brookings and Service Year Alliance's recent [joint event](#) on "Building a Pipeline to Energy Sector Careers through Service Years."

### *Rural Electric Cooperatives*

Additionally, grant assistance to Rural Electric Cooperatives under IRA Sec. 22004 could also be structured to incentivize nonprofit cooperatives to partner with national service programs and state service commissions to build capacity to deploy renewable energy systems. Some national service programs have already embedded corps members to support rural communities' broadband planning and expansion at local or state agencies, and corps members could be leveraged in a similar manner at local cooperatives for renewable electricity transitions.

### *Administrative Opportunity: Rural Partners Network*

Finally, the agency could also consider using administrative funds to infuse national service into the Rural Partners Network, to help stand up these new clean energy transition programs through existing interagency place-based networks. This model has worked particularly well for HUD's place-based initiatives, with external partners including those in disadvantaged communities able to apply directly through HUD. The [RARE AmeriCorps program](#), operated by the University of Oregon, is already doing work to bring USDA/RD climate-related resources to rural communities and serves as a prime example of how the agency could leverage higher education partners in Rural Partners Network states as an intermediary organization for individual service year placements in rural areas.

### **National Forest Systems Restoration: Scaling What Works**

As mentioned, the U.S. Forest Service has a [long history](#) of successful partnership with local service and conservation corps to support habitat and watershed restoration, conservation, wildfire prevention and remediation, trail maintenance and other key activities stemming from the 1930s era Civilian Conservation Corps to today.

IRA's Section 23001 resources could build upon these existing partnerships and support the creation of new conservation corps to accomplish vegetation management, wildfire prevention, fuels reduction, and old growth forest conservation efforts through cooperative agreements with local corps programs.

### **Urban and Community Forestry Program and Justice40 Alignment**

There are a number of national service programs that already do conservation and greening efforts in urban or underserved communities, but with IRA Section 23003 resources that work can be scaled up in a significant way. Municipal level governments across the country have already begun to build up these efforts, including through [partnerships with service year](#)

[programs](#), and USFS' Urban and Community Forestry Program can plug directly into this work and help it to scale nationwide.

Coordinating with the national [network of state service commissions](#) and aligning with Justice40 principles and tools will help USFS to best target these resources to communities that need it most. Providing opportunities in communities hardest hit by climate change is a great way to commit to the Administration's environmental justice priorities.

### Next Steps and White House Leadership

The administration's broad vision of the Civilian Climate Corps was always intended as an interagency effort, incorporating national service and partnerships across USDA and USFS, DOI, NOAA, DOT, DOE, and other federal partners, with guidance, stipends, and professional development for corps members provided by AmeriCorps and DOL. In one of the Biden Administration's [first executive orders](#), the Administration requested that federal agencies work together to plan for how a Civilian Climate Corps could be established. We believe the recommendations outlined above would fit into the Administration's vision for the CCC, and continued White House leadership will be useful to support that overarching goal. A more formal interagency task force could help facilitate this effort at USDA and other agencies interested in similar goals.

In terms of next steps, USDA will have to determine which forms of interagency partnership with AmeriCorps — AmeriCorps State & National (ASN), AmeriCorps VISTA, or AmeriCorps NCCC — best meet the agency's needs and IRA initiatives. Service Year Alliance believes ASN and VISTA models would work best for USDA IRA priorities and would be happy to continue this dialogue with federal partners.

Once a program model(s) is established, USDA can work with AmeriCorps to enter an interagency agreement. As USDA considers options to promote workforce development and talent pipelines through IRA initiatives, including creating a new national service program at USDA/RD, Service Year Alliance is available to provide guidance through the program design process, to connect the agency with other service champions throughout the federal government, and to identify helpful resources including past interagency agreements.

Service Year Alliance also currently manages a cohort of [clean energy and climate-related service year programs](#) to help overcome shared barriers, should it be useful to engage with a sounding board of current programs. We also lead a multi-sector coalition, the [Partnership for the Civilian Climate Corps](#), a nonpartisan, multi-sector partnership of more than 100 organizations across the country, which advocates for additional federal investment in climate national service and workforce development programs. The Partnership for the CCC has been a strong supporter of this type of interagency partnership to meet diverse climate and clean energy needs through national service, including in rural and underserved areas.

Significant opportunities exist for USDA to leverage national service to achieve its climate, conservation, clean energy and resilience goals, in addition to meeting future hiring needs. Interagency partnership between USDA and AmeriCorps could help meet the agency's urgent priorities and build sustainable talent pipelines for decades to come.