



## USDA Forest Service Public Lands Corps Project Management & Operations Frequently Asked Questions

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**Q1: What is the PLC program?**

The PLC is a work and education program involving the nation’s conservation and service corps that contributes to the rehabilitation, restoration, and repair of public land resources and infrastructures. PLC projects provide opportunities for community and national service, work experience and training to men and women, and veterans who are unemployed or underemployed persons.

**Q2: Are there age and other eligibility requirements for PLC members?**

The only requirement for PLC members is age. Participants must be between 16 and 25 years of age and Resource Assistants ages 17 and up.

**Q3: What is the statutory authority for the PLC?**

The PLC is authorized by the Public Lands Corps (PLC) Act of 1993 as amended by the Public Lands Corps Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2005.



**Q4: What types of projects do PLC members accomplish?**

PLC members may perform appropriate conservation projects which is any project that furthers the conservation, restoration, construction or rehabilitation of natural, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational, or scenic resources. PLC members perform a wide range of services ranging from maintaining and restoring the many thousands of miles of trails to coordinating volunteers and special events on National Forests and Grasslands. Members create healthy and safe environments for recreation and exercise, support visitor experiences, and preserve historic structures. They assist with prescribed burns, may be red-carded firefighters, serve in leadership roles as team or crew leaders, conduct research and needs assessments, and support hydrology programs. Projects may not violate non-duplication or non-displacement standards as defined in 42 USC § 12637.

**Q5: Does the Forest Service operate PLC programs or PLC projects, or both?**

Although the statute gives the Secretary of Agriculture authority to directly operate PLC programs or enroll PLC members, the Forest Service has opted not to exercise this authority at this time but instead to work through partner organizations to conduct PLC projects.

**Q6: How does the Forest Service determine if an organization is qualified to perform a PLC project?**

Forest Service personnel must verify that PLC program partners established by a Federal, State or local government, by the governing body of an Indian tribe or a non-profit organization, or operated by the Forest Service meet the following criteria:

- A. Offer meaningful, full-time, productive work or service experiences for individuals between the ages of 16 and 25, inclusive, in a natural or cultural resource setting; and/or resource assistants ages 17 and up.
- B. Provide participants with a combination of work experiences, basic and life skills, education, training, and support services; and
- C. Provide participants with the opportunity to develop citizenship values and skills through service to their community and the United States.

**Q7: Who has authority to enter into an agreement to do a PLC project?**

Regional Foresters, Station Directors, the Area Director, Job Corps National Office Director, and Forest Supervisors have delegated authority to identify a project under the Public Lands Corps program and enter into agreements (challenge cost share or participating) with a partner to perform a PLC project or activity.

**Q8: Will outcomes from PLC projects be used to perform work that may guide subsequent Agency decisions?**



Most PLC projects are physical labor projects that are performed by a crew supervised by a leader affiliated with the partner organization. The project consists of clearly defined tasks identified and monitored by a FS staff and documented in the agreement. PLC projects performed by crews are generally not activities that guide subsequent Agency decisions. However, resource assistants (RA) or interns with specific educational backgrounds assigned to units to work on various projects may collect data or perform other tasks that could influence subsequent Agency decisions. Although RA/Interns are engaged through a partner organization that provide the stipend or living allowance to the RA/Intern, the RA is generally directly supervised by a FS staff who defines the tasks, monitors the work, provides feedback, mentoring and overall coordination of the RA/intern's work.

**Q9: How are projects identified and who selects the group that a forest will partner with on a PLC project?**

Projects are identified by the Forest Service based on their annual work plans and agency and unit priorities. Once a unit has determined project needs they will either look to available in-house resources or seek partnership support to accomplish the project. If a local unit determines that a project should be completed by a partnership organization, they will initiate a process to engage with an organization. Many of these organizations already have agreements in place.

Given the decentralized structure of the Forest Service, each unit has maximum flexibility to determine which partner organizations they will work with. However, partnerships are oftentimes initiated with organizations that work in and around the FS unit and have worked with the FS or another land management agency previously or through a special initiative.

For instance, in an effort to expand the network of partner organizations the FS and other land management agencies under the auspices of the AGO initiative, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC), are developing a list of member organizations that meet minimum 21CSC standards. Organizations that offered conservation service programs for youth and/or veterans were invited to respond to a Federal Register Notice (FRN) by submitting a letter of interest that outlined the organization's alignment with the 21CSC eight principles of high quality programs. This was conducted under the auspices of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) National Council, an AGO initiative focused on working through partnerships to expand service, work and learning opportunities for youth and veterans on public lands. The current list of organizations who applied and are eligible as well as the FRN are available on the Forest Service Youth and Veterans Employment website at this link.

<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/youth-veterans-service/index.shtml>



**Q10. Can a PLC project be used to accomplish work normally assigned to FS employees?**

No. The Fair Labor Standards Act as well as [42 USC § 12637](#) stipulates that volunteers may not be used to replace or displace federal employees or be used to perform any work that is inherently a government function as defined by OMB Circular A-76. The determination of when to use a variety of volunteer organizations, partnerships, etc. is based on the Forest Service units' annual work plans. If the FS Unit leadership initiates a process to engage a partner to perform a PLC project, Grants & Agreements officers will provide the check and balance to ensure that the applicable laws are followed prior to finalizing an agreement for the FS unit and partner organization. Generally the work performed by a PLC member is outlined in the agreement and identifies specific tasks that are to be completed by the PLC members during the life of the agreement.

**Q11. What type of training should a FS staff member have prior to providing oversight for a PLC resource?**

The FS has elected to not directly operate a PLC program at this time. PLC projects will be performed through partnerships with eligible organizations PLC organizations are required to track PLC Participant and Resource Assistant work hours which must be certified by a federal employee with supervisory oversight of the project. When a project agreement is completed an orientation to the project is hosted and the FS staff assigned to monitor the tasks in the agreement is expected to attend and is often actively engaged in the orientation as a presenter. Additionally, the Coordinator's guide for Volunteer Services, the Orientation booklet and the Orientation Desk Guide as well as quarterly webinars that address relevant Volunteers & Service topics are available to any interested FS staff member. A session on how to utilize the PLC database established to track and verify PLC member hours will be included in the PLC project orientation session. Links to these websites and resources will also be included on the PLC website.

**Q12: When there are competing groups who can offer the same services how does the FS line officer determine which one to pick?**

The FS representative may establish an agreement with any organization that they have determined can perform the project. How a local line officer determines which organization to work with could be influenced by prior performance, availability of the partner organization to perform the work at the time needed, whether there is a master participating or challenge cost share agreement already in place, and proximity of the partner organization to the PLC project, among other things. In the past there has not generally been competition for these types of partnerships so it is highly probably that local FS officials have not been inundated with requests and therefore not in a position to pick and choose.

**Q13: What mechanism is used to formally define the roles and responsibilities of partners and US Forest Service staff and how is the language framed?**



A formal Participating and Challenge Cost Share agreement that outlines roles and responsibilities of both the partner and Forest Service signed by a line officer and the partner organization is required to engage a partner organization to implement a PLC project or other activity. The Agreement must specifically state the authorities and responsibilities of both the sponsor and the Forest Service regarding the status of Participants or Resource Assistants, working conditions, training, pay, supervision, and other operational details. Acquisition Management staff shall review all agreements prior to execution. Refer questions regarding applicability of laws and program requirements to Acquisition Management. Language regarding the U.S. Forest Service responsibilities in Master Participating Agreement may read as follows:

*The U.S. Forest Service Shall:*

- A. Promote the internship program throughout the U.S. Forest Service regions, stations, and area.*
- B. Explore opportunities at local levels to leverage internship engagement through this initiative and coordinate with on stated projects.*
- C. Facilitate program enhancement activities such as mentoring and opportunities for interns to enhance their understanding and awareness of natural and cultural resources.*
- D. Promote opportunities for interns to access employment with the U.S. Forest Service and other natural and cultural resource agencies.*
- E. Identify projects, and manage, review, and approve all reports, inspections and any consultation request associated with projects performed under the auspices of this agreement and supplemental agreements.*