

Katy Hussey-Sloniker: Welcome to the National Service: Novel Strategies to Measure the Return on Forestry Risk Mitigation. Today's webinar will discuss the portfolio of work associated with calculating return on investment on national service, the novel strategy specific to return on investment calculation associated with forestry risk mitigation and the grantee perspective in both participating in this study and how this work contributes to their value proposition within the community. Our presenters today are Dr. Lily Zandniapour from the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps, Scott Scherbinski, program director for Nevada Conservation Corps Great Basin Institute, Ben Miller, project manager for the ROI studies project at ICF, Dominic Modicamore, technical lead for the return on investment studies project at ICF, George Voigt, economic analyst for the return on investment studies project for ICF, with special reflection from Benjamin Olsen, deputy Regional Administrator, west Region AmeriCorps and facilitated Q&A session with Dr. Emily McDonald, a research analyst with the Office of Research and Evaluation. There'll be plenty of time at the conclusion of the presentations to ask our panelists your questions. Please be sure to place them in the chat. Dr. McDonald will be collecting your questions for the Q&A time block towards the end of the webinar. And now, here to welcome us is Dr. Mary Hyde, director of the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation.

Mary Hyde: Thank you, Katy. And thank you for everyone who's decided to take some time today to learn about the Nevada Conservation Corps and an innovative research strategy used to empirically demonstrate the monetary and social return on investing in AmeriCorps and programs like the Nevada Conservation Corps. I want to spend just a few minutes contextualizing this work in this webinar. Next slide please. For those who may not be familiar with AmeriCorps, we are a US federal agency that is the nation's largest grant maker for national service and volunteering. Our mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. There are six national service programs that partner with organizations at the state and local levels. National service program participants work with local volunteers on a wide range of community driven initiatives and projects. These diverse projects help ignite and sustain civic life in America. Next slide please.

The agency, its office of research and evaluation and our partners have built a body of evidence for this collaborative work. Evidence building is part of our legislative mandate and is aligned with the foundations for evidence-based policy making Act of 2018, or the Evidence Act. The Evidence Act encourages federal agencies to use a learning agenda as a tool for building relevant and actionable evidence. Our agency's learning agenda, or as we have named it, the strategic learning and evidence building plan, compliments, aligns with and supports our agency's strategic plan to provide a roadmap for generating credible, relevant and actionable information about organizational effectiveness, operational performance, and the outcomes of national service

programs. Evidence generated from the learning agenda informs our leadership on the extent to which our agency is achieving its mission at the organizational, programmatic and operational levels and maximizes agency performance. Today's webinar is part of a series designed to facilitate learning within AmeriCorps and with external audiences, drive awareness and understanding of AmeriCorps work and available resources and build capacity to use evidence to inform practice.

Disseminating our content through webinars like this is the first step in transferring knowledge, promoting learning across stakeholders and interacting with practitioners and end users to create supportive learning environments. Our second step involves you. We want AmeriCorps programs and our evidence to be used for the benefit of communities. It's that simple. We believe AmeriCorps is a powerful example of how to mobilize service and community action. Next slide please. With that, I'd like to introduce to you all Dr. Lily Zandniapour, who is a research and evaluation manager in the AmeriCorps office of Research and Evaluation. Dr. Zandniapour is an economist by training and has been with the agency for a little over 10 years now. Dr. Zandniapour has spearheaded the use of targeted return on investment studies to build evidence for AmeriCorps and our partners. Lily.

Lily Zandniapour:

Hello everyone. Thank you, Mary, and good afternoon all. It is a pleasure to be with you today with my colleagues at AmeriCorps and also with representatives and colleagues from our partner agencies and organizations. Next slide please. I want to sort of take us back to where Mary ended and start with the agency learning agenda that Mary referenced as you see it is on the AmeriCorps website and can be looked at. This learning agenda really includes lots of questions that the agency and the staff want answered around our programs efficiency, effectiveness. And so there are lots of questions in there and sort of the approach that the agency uses to answer those questions. Some of these questions are short term based, some of them are for medium and long term. It includes questions tied to new or priority policies and programs, as well as some evergreen questions that the agency would like to answer through research and evaluation. In that vein, one of the evergreen questions that is on the learning agenda on page 11 is how can AmeriCorps empirically document the social and economic returns on investment in national service strategies and in interventions?

And our approach to answering this question has been through conducting targeted return on investment analysis using past evaluation studies and any other relevant existing and credible empirical research that allows us to measure and estimate programs returns per dollar invested or what is called ROI. Next slide please. Many of you may already be familiar with the concept of return on investment, but I just wanted to remind everyone that return on investment studies estimate the amount of benefits that a program generates for each unit of cost. An ROI estimate tells you what the payoff is for each dollar of investment and you can think of ROI as the bang for the buck. To develop an ROI study, researchers capture program benefits and monetize them, and many

of these benefits are tied to programs outcomes and impacts. Costs too must be measured, including contributions from various funding streams.

ROI estimates also typically account for what we call opportunity cost. That is benefits that the stakeholders forego in order to invest their time and resources in a particular program. Return on investment analysis really takes evaluation one step further. The ROI approach uses the evaluation findings on program impacts and information on program cost to really measure the value of this social intervention as peg to its cost. It is a form of performance measure that adds another lens to an outcome or impact evaluation, which looks at the effectiveness of the program or intervention in achieving its intended or desired outcomes. What is unique about this notion of return on investment is that it allows you to compare values across multiple programs and build an evidence base for an intervention to support decision-making.

As I mentioned earlier, what we want to do basically with this initiative for measuring return on investment is to really develop and advance our evidence footprint in this area and build on the collective investments that we have done along with our partners grantees in really measuring the effectiveness of programs, building the evidence base and ensuring that what is done with the invested dollars of our AmeriCorps are really bearing fruit for the American people. If we could go to the next slide, please. You may be familiar with ROI research that has looked at the ROI of national service before. There's been two ROI studies that have been conducted on national service outside of what we will discuss today. There was a 2013 study that was conducted by Columbia University. It looked at youth and senior based national service in the US and it was commissioned by Voices for National Service and the Aspen Institute. Another study was conducted in 2020 by ICF, our partners actually, and it looked at return on a collection of more than two dozen AmeriCorps programs combined. And that, again, was sort of commissioned by Voices for National Service. Starting in 2019, AmeriCorps began our ROI studies project. It is an initiative to estimate return on investment for specific programs that rely on national service.

What we did was to form a partnership with our colleagues at ICF and their team of experts through a multi-year contract to review the portfolio of ROI ready programs that employ national service, select a set of programs every year for a deeper look at ROI feasibility and develop four studies per year to build on that portfolio of programs that we have ROIs for. This has involved both ICF working with us, sharing with us results of the feasibility study, checking with our grantees to make sure that they're ready to participate in this initiative, and also drawing on a lot of information and research that ties into the work that we sponsor.

If we could go to the next program, there is the link, as you see, to a landing page on our evidence exchange, which is the repository of our library of research that is open to the public. This landing page gets you into all of the studies that we have commissioned to date on a return on investment study. I

encourage you to take a look and see what we have there. Thank you so much. To date, we have looked at 12 programs and connected studies on them. These have been subjects of these more in-depth ROI studies. We have looked at many more to check their feasibility to see if they're ready. But we've tried to keep the portfolio of projects that we have looked at to be representative and diverse and cover the footprint of the agency in terms of its investments.

We have investments in multiple focus areas, education, health, environmental stewardship, disaster services, economic opportunity, veterans and military affairs. We've tried to really target these studies to reflect the diversity of our programs and we are lucky in that we have had the ability to do around three studies to date that are in the cross-section between environmental stewardship and disaster services. And what you see on the right side of this screen is a fact sheet that we have produced that captures sort of the top line findings from these studies for those who want to look very closely at sort of the high level and they're not as interested in some of the in-depth aspects of these studies, but there are the full reports on our website that show you the full analysis of what ICF has conducted. It also has a portfolio of research briefs that try to communicate the results of these studies in a shorter format that can be used to circulate and share with others.

We have been very grateful to have the partnership of our grantees in this effort. This is very important and we are really grateful for their participation and interest in partnering with us to do this work. Typically doing these studies, for programs, there is some level of risk involved because you're really kind of putting the program up for scrutiny, especially if you are going to share those results with the public. And so it takes quite a bit of courage, openness to learning and willingness to really look at the evidence regarding how the program operates, the value it generates and so forth. We are really blessed to be able to do this with our partners and are grateful for that. If you could go to the next slide.

Thank you. Today we are featuring the study with the Nevada Conservation Corps. What you see here is a snapshot look at the research brief that was prepared by ICF based on this study, which is that shorter piece that I was telling you about and the cover for the full report and just a tad bit, although I'm going to kind of sort of pass it on to my colleague to talk more about this, but Nevada Commission Corps is an environmental and disaster prevention service focus program and we are really lucky to have them be part of this initiative and to be here to share their experience with us and with you. I will now turn it over to Scott Scherbinski, program director for Nevada Conservation Core, a program of the Great Basin Institute to provide you with an overview and background about the corps and situate this study and the experience of engaging in it as it relates to NCC, and sorry about that, CC, and its work. With that, I'll pass it on to Scott.

Scott Scherbinski: Thank you so much, Lilly. Appreciate it. As mentioned, my name is Scott Scherbinski. I am the program director for the Nevada Conservation Corps with Great Basin Institute. I've been here at the institute for just about five years

now. Got my start in conservation working with conservation corps programs in the Pacific Northwest, as well as down in Arizona. Went on to work with the National Park Service as a wildlife biologist for 10 years over in California and when this opportunity with Nevada Conservation Corps came open, kind of leaped up at the opportunity to help support a program that personally has been impactful to my life and my career and yeah. Excited to be back working in the corps world. Next slide please. Little bit of background about Nevada Conservation Corps. We are just one program that's nestled within the Great Basin Institute. 2023 marks the 25th anniversary of GBI. Started back in 1998 truly as a field studies institute with education and outreach initially for college students and then rapidly expanding K through 12, working with educators, continuing working with college students.

NCC is just one program under GBI that started in 1999, and we've been funded through AmeriCorps since the inception of NCC. We currently are working across the state of Nevada as well as up Sierra Nevada range in the lower cascades in California with the primary goal focused of our current AmeriCorps grant is reducing the threat of wildfire across the west. Next slide please. AmeriCorps supports our members through a variety of activities. We are a fairly traditional crew based conservation core running small teams of five folks that typically deploy out of one of our field offices based in Nevada, either in Reno or Las Vegas. They head out and engage in a variety of conservation based work with an ever-growing collection of partners across all the major public land management agencies, as well as state and local municipalities.

The main focus of the work that we do is a reduction of a wildfire threat through fuels reduction. We also engage in [inaudible 00:21:18] of noxious weeds, both prior to and after wildfires move through. We support post burn restoration projects through seeding and introduction of native plants to areas that have burned to help them recover more rapidly. We also oversee the construction and maintenance of trails, specifically with the focus of trying to build those out in a way that helps support healthy recreation while reducing wildfire. We also have small teams that work in health and assessment teams that capture critical data on both conditions of forest health and range land health across our project areas. Next slide please.

The ROI and the focus of our evaluation results is from our previous grant cycle, although we are continuing the same evaluation through our current grant cycle. This study really focused on data collected in our 1920 grant year where we worked closely with our partners with AmeriCorps, our state commission, Nevada volunteers, the University of Nevada, their Center for Public Evaluation as well as the US Forest Service, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest to develop an efficacy evaluation to look at the impacts of our fuel reduction efforts. We did this in a couple of different ways. We collected data using the Browns Planer method on a total of 210 data points during a single grant year. We did this across all three grant years of this grant cycle. We also collected photo points that were also analyzed for the fire regime class, the FRCC, which really relates

the risk of the ecosystem to uncharacteristic and uncontrollable wildfire behavior facts.

We had teams that went out prior to treatments, prior to fuel reduction efforts would collect data on 70 points that were within our treatment area. Those 70 points were matched with an additional 70 points outside of our treatment area. Those comparison sites, we used ARC GIS mapping software to look at aspects slope and vegetation type to make sure that those sites were comparable. We collected data on the pre-treatment areas, the comparison sites, and then once the treatments were complete, we went back in and collected data on the points within the treatment area that we successfully treated. To evaluate the effectiveness, we looked at FRCC and then transferred all the raw data to UNR for analysis and due to fuels reduction, the FRCC rating on our treated plots decreased from 2.10 to comparison to other untreated sites that were 2.39 on a one through three scale.

The results of the stats run on our raw data also showed statistically significant difference in the pre and post treatment evaluation measures. As I mentioned, we are continuing this into our current grant cycle, very similar evaluation measure. It's slightly updated in ASI in the number of sites in number of years that we're collecting the data, but we are continuing to use the same evaluation method, which over time will give us a very broad six year efficacy of the work that we've been doing here in Nevada and California. And with that, I will turn it over to the folks at ICF that we partnered with to run through our ROI study. Thank you.

Ben Miller:

Great. Thank you so much, Scott. Really appreciate your partnership on this study. It's been really a privilege for us at ICF to be part of this series. Lilly showed the link earlier to the full set of 12 studies that AmeriCorps has published so far and if you ever lose track of that link, you can just Google AmeriCorps ROI and you'll get to that page. I do hope you'll all check out the whole range of ROI studies that have been published so far. We're really excited to be here with you today. I'm Ben Miller, project manager for ICF's support to this project. I'm here with Dominic Modicamore and George Voigt. And in addition, our project director, Janet Pershing, and analysts from other ICF analysts and from BCT partners have been part of this important series. We're very excited about this body of work and to dig deeper into the NCC study in particular. Next slide please.

Before we go deep into the NCC study, we wanted to take just a step back and talk about our general approach to ROI studies generally. An important part of our process before we even get started crunching the numbers is logic modeling and a very careful review of the subject program to get as comprehensive a picture as we can of all the benefits and all the costs involved in the program. What you're seeing on the slide is some key stakeholder groups that we look at in terms of what benefits a program generates, and on the right-hand side, some sources of cost that we look to so that we get a complete picture on the cost side as well. Just running through our stakeholder groups. In some cases,

there are direct program participants, for example, on a job training program and also family members that benefit from the activities of the program. That's not the case for NCC.

There are other beneficiaries for NCC's work, but for other programs, program participants and family members are an important group that benefits from the work of the program. In addition, we look at societal benefits or benefits to the wider community. Taking NCC for a moment, trail creation and trail maintenance is something that benefits members of the communities in Nevada. In addition, almost all of our ROI studies have incorporated the benefits to AmeriCorps members themselves because the research establishes that AmeriCorps members enjoy higher employment post service than a comparable group of people who don't have the AmeriCorps experience. That's incorporated into our studies, as well as government, in terms of reduced spending of various types and increased tax revenue in some cases that result from NCC or from other programs. On the cost side, we look at opportunity cost, as Lily alluded to earlier, as well as the actual program costs. The opportunity costs typically involve the cost to AmeriCorps members of the year they dedicate to their year of service and also funding opportunity costs because the funding used for a given program could be used for other purposes. We account for that.

We also get a comprehensive picture of the funding from private funders and government funders that makes each program happen. Next slide please. Now let's zero in on NCC in particular and look at the key stakeholder groups we looked at for NCC program benefits and what those benefits were. I mentioned AmeriCorps members that contribute to NCC enjoy additional earnings post-service owing to their reduced unemployment and also the increased educational attainment that they accomplish post-service and we account for the value of the post-tax living allowances that AmeriCorps members get. Government benefits from NCC in the form of increased tax revenue from those increased earnings of NCC AmeriCorps members and reduced spending by government on corrections, public assistance and social insurance that's connected to the increased educational attainment of NCC AmeriCorps members. Like many of the benefits we calculate, we use existing literature to document and rigorously calculate the amount of these types of benefits. And finally, and perhaps definitely last but not least, are the important benefits to society of the wildfire reduction benefits that Scott alluded to, the habitat improvement benefits and the creation of trails and the maintenance of trails that NCC engages in.

With that, I will turn things over to Dominic Modicamore who will talk to us about the results that we found from the NCC study.

Dominic Modicamore: Thanks, Ben. Good afternoon everyone. I'm going to talk about the various ROIs that we calculated for NCC. And as you can see from the slide, there's quite a few of them. If we wanted to focus on one ROI that is the most comprehensive and provides the clearest picture of what the ROI is for NCC, it would be the

\$20.66. How that's interpreted is for every dollar of cost to support the NCC program, there is a return of \$20.66 from all of the funding included. And that would be returned to society, to AmeriCorps members, to government and the full impact of the program. That would be the ROI if you wanted to report just one. Clearly an impact that's pretty sizable for a program like this.

I'll just break out some of the various different methods we use for these ROIs. We calculate for all of the ROIs, calculated short term or medium term and a long term scenario. The short-term scenario is just looking at one year of impact, the year following the investment in the program. Medium term impact would look 15 years out. That represents the mid-range, assuming that after 15 years the impact begins to wear off and goes back to the baseline. And then the long-term impact is a 30-year impact. The difference there is that we calculate the primary difference is that the wages and the earnings, and in this case the ecosystem benefits go out for 30 years. They're different than the baseline for 30 years. Those are the short term, medium term and long term. In this case with ANCC and other environmental programs that we've measured, we also estimate ROI for a range of ecosystem benefits.

In this case, you can see we break it out again, a low, average and high based on the societal returns for the environmental impacts that these programs have. That's broke down as well. And then another way that we break it out is by the different funding streams. The first one is total benefits to per federal dollar. That's all of the benefits to society, government, and the AmeriCorps members for each federal dollar spent. The second way that we break out ROI is the total benefits per funder dollar. This includes the same as the one above, the total benefits to society, AmeriCorps members and also government over all the dollars expended to support the program. That's why I think that the 2066 ROI represents that total benefit and total dollars. That's the reason why I would focus on that one. And then the third way we calculate the ROI by funding stream is federal government benefits per federal dollar.

In this case we look at just the benefits to federal government alone and we measure that against the total funding by just the federal government alone. In this case, you could see that's the only ROI scenario that is under one. It's not returning the full investment to the federal government. And that's because it's primarily a program to benefit society. Society benefits from these environmental programs and they see the actual monetary return rather than the federal government. In this case, we see a very substantial return when society is included in the ROI because of the services that are provided by NCC and the work that they do benefits society for the most part. That that's a snapshot of the various ROIs that we calculated. I will hand it over to George Voigt who I worked with closely on this to discuss some of the novel approaches that we use to calculate these ROIs.

George Voigt:

Thank you, Dominic. Before we dive into some of the specific methodological aspects of this study, I just wanted to take a moment to quickly review some of the ways that we're generating benefit valuation. And the key distinction on this

slide is going to be between market and non-market benefits. And you can think about those in the context of NCC as a market benefit being something like property damage that has a dollar value attributed to it for reparations. And a non-market benefit would be something like the carbon sequestration value of the trees that were burned. And so one of the challenges that we face is trying to come up with values for all of these non-market benefits that are attributed to the actions that NCC generates in it. Next slide please.

To start off, we want to cover the big headline thing that NCC does, which is the wildfire reduction benefits. And to start with that, what we did is we looked at all of the area that NCC treats on an annual basis and we used their evaluation studies and the literature to estimate an effective reduction in burn areas from these sort of uncontrolled wildfires and then broke it down into three main areas that we were able to attribute values to. The first being these ecosystem services that range based on the type of ecosystem that was treated, and you can see there's a pretty large range there from just below \$400 to almost \$3,000 per acre based on the existing ecosystem services. And that's what causes a lot of that range in ROI valuation that Dominic was talking about. And then the second area that we were able to look at were some of the human health benefits associated from sort of the release of air particulates following a burn.

And the last area was trying to place a value on some of the actual carbon dioxide emissions where we utilized the social cost of carbon and some estimates on how much carbon would be released following an acre of this forest land burning. Next slide please. And so then the next aspect of activities that NCC engages in are these habitat improvements where we're able to quantify on a per acre basis the value of these ecosystems that are restored and apply those values based on the data that NCC was able to provide to us. Next slide please. And one of the new things that we looked at doing during this study was trying to discount these environmental benefits over time as regrowth occurs following wildfires. We were able to find some existing literature that documented those regrowth patterns over time. And so all of our environmental ecosystem service values are discounted over the period of the short, medium, long term based on these regrowth patterns. Next slide please.

And the last main aspect that we've touched on a couple of times is this trail maintenance and creation benefit. And so again, thanks to NCC, we have some great information about the number of trails that they were able to maintain and create on an annual basis. And we, through the literature, looked at some health and recreational use value costs per mile of trails and were able to attribute these social benefits to this portion of NCC's activities. And in a similar line with the last slide, we did try to incorporate some of the upkeep costs on an annual basis, which for subsequent years after the first, resulted to about 50% of the annual benefits for this portion of the activities. And so with that, I'll hand it back to Ben Miller for the program perspective discussion.

Ben Miller:

Great. Thank you, George. And we wanted to invite Scott back. Scott, really appreciate your partnership and your agency's partnership in doing this study

and we wanted to bring you back to talk a little bit about how this study fits into NCC and your ongoing work and what's ahead for NCC. Thank you for being with us, again. You haven't had that much time with this study, it was published late last year, but it has the potential to help Great Basin Institute articulate the value of what NCC does. To start, was eager to get your thoughts on how you might use this study in the future as NCC continues and grows and moves forward.

Scott Scherbinski: Yeah. Thanks, Ben. Appreciate it. Yeah. I think the obvious tool for this study would be to outreach to new partners to kind of highlight the benefits of the work that we do beyond our narratives and put some more of the hard numbers to it, which is a huge help. And then I think more timely in what we've experienced, especially in 2022, has really helped to inform recruitment. I think AmeriCorps programs across the country obviously really struggled with recruitment in 2022. I think this is a great tool to highlight, hey, you have the opportunity to come work with us and not just earn a living allowance and earn an educational award, but make a true impact to the communities that you're working in. And know a lot of folks, we do recruit nationwide, but there's no avoiding during the fire season the news of the catastrophic wildfires out here.

And so putting a little bit more of a point on the impacts that our individual AmeriCorps members, as well as that our teams are having on that. I think will be a really interesting tool to see how that plays out during this field season. The other things that GBI and NCC are really interested in looking at this study more closely is as a way to potentially use as match for some of our agreements, and especially some of our agreements that do have significant match requirements that we, as a relatively small organization, sometimes struggle to meet. And I think the other thing, I know that this is a much greater and wider conversation with environmental service programs, AmeriCorps environmental service programs and specifically with conservation cores across the country are using this as a tool to make a case that some of the match requirements on our grants and agreements maybe should be adjusted in the light of the impact of studies like this that hey, can we hold these up and have waivers for match because of all the work that we're doing on the wider landscape as opposed to very individual focused project areas or project partners.

Ben Miller: Great, thank you. We worked early on to identify a range of benefits that we could rigorously measure and monetize that many of those built on the evaluation work that GBI has done on NCC. But there's one benefit that we've talked about that we weren't able to incorporate just because the data wasn't there to make that possible, and that was the workforce development aspect of what GBI does in terms of training people with a set of skills related to the work of ncc. Do you want to talk about that dimension since that is one thing that unfortunately was kind of left out of the analysis but is nonetheless potentially really important?

Scott Scherbinski: Yeah, it's huge. A main part of the NCC program within the Great Basin Institute as a larger organization, as well as with our partners, is really to act as a

stepping stone for folks that are new to conservation. I certainly benefited from that when I got my start in conservation. I struggled for a long time and wasn't until I worked for a conservation goal program that I kind of got that jumpstart into that. I think that is a big benefit that is not captured. We have several folks within our organization that got their start with the NCC as a crew member on a crew and have matriculated up through our ranks to our senior leadership levels. And beyond that, we're getting more and more interest. I know I've mentioned the recruitment struggles that AmeriCorps more broadly and certainly our program specifically had in 2022. The federal agencies were not immune to that either. And I think more and more they are coming to us with programs and projects that specifically are tailored to be as a pathway to get folks from AmeriCorps into public service.

An exciting partnership that we're going to try to launch this year is with professional trail building organization and try to partner directly with them as this means of, hey, come work with us, get that initial experience and then go on to a professional career path beyond what we're doing.

Ben Miller: That's great, thank you. We have time for one more question and that is what's next for NCC? What's coming up this year for the program?

Scott Scherbinski: Yeah. There's a couple big areas that we're pretty excited about that do definitely play directly into the spirit of our AmeriCorps grant. One is just last week we launched a year long prescribed burn and fuels reduction crew in the Lake Tahoe basin working with the forest service up there. Really excited about that program. Again, the direct hope of that is not just the initial benefit of reduction of fuels to what is really a crown jewel of our country, but also to provide that pathway for those members that are participating in that program and into jobs of the forest service, whether it's wildfire or forestry. We also just signed our agreement with AmeriCorps to become an AmeriCorps disaster response team. And so we're anxiously and rapidly trying to get ourselves up to speed so we can deploy on some disasters nationwide and continue to support the larger societal efforts to recover us from what we continue to see on a nationwide basis.

Ben Miller: That's great. Well thank you, Scott. Good luck on those frontiers and-

Scott Scherbinski: Thanks, Ben I appreciate all the [inaudible 00:49:45].

Ben Miller: Being part of the webinar today. Next slide please. I wanted to hand it off to Ben Olson, deputy regional administrator for the Western region, for Ben, your reflections on today's webinar.

Ben Olson: Yeah. Thank you, Ben. Appreciate the introduction. And yeah, first off, really want to thank Scott and the staff of the Great Basin Institute for their incredible work leading the Nevada Conservation Corps and partnering with AmeriCorps on this ROI analysis. As a regional office, we work to support providing technical

assistance to grantees across the region and one of our key and primary roles is conducting outreach, really engaging with potential partners. These can be local nonprofit organizations, municipal governments and a variety of local stakeholders to really discuss how can AmeriCorps really be a primary tool for helping communities solve some of their most pressing issues. And I think studies like this really help not just demonstrate the efficacy of AmeriCorps and effectively leveraging taxpayer dollars, but really educating communities on what an incredible tool AmeriCorps can be. I mean for all of our states across the west region, wildfire threat is a very serious concern. And mitigation strategies and tools and programs such as AmeriCorps that can be leveraged in such a way is something that communities really want to learn about and want to know about.

But when they're considering, when we talk to local organizations, they're considering do we [inaudible 00:51:17] the AmeriCorps program, do we go in another direction? We need to be able to demonstrate impact and we need to be able to be able to speak to that competently and in a way that really shows that this has been effective elsewhere. And I think it's studies like this that really drive that point home and make our job easier as we talk to, whether it be again, local nonprofits, state leaders. I actually, yeah, been in a number of rooms with state officials where they have looked at ROI as a method of determining do we want to make investments? And we share kind of on a personal anecdote, before I came to work for the agency, I actually helped run an AmeriCorps program out in Arizona and was invited at one point to join the Tucson Mayor's Poverty Commission, which is a group of local leaders, mostly executive directors of nonprofits and private philanthropy, a lot of heads of foundations really looked at series of ROI studies.

This was focused on poverty, so a different issue area, but really trying to see what, with limited resources, this group had, what are the most effective strategies for moving the needle on poverty and a few different angles on that. From that, they actually identified a couple different strategies, one of them was developing community schools, and it was by aligning the AmeriCorps resources of our program with those strategies deployed in other communities that had a demonstrated ROI that helped us leverage such a few \$100,000 dollars to help scale up our programs and really grow in this fairly successful program model in Tucson. I know there's been lots of cases across the country around different issue areas where both, I mean impact evaluations have also been very effective, but I think ROI analysis really, as was kind of highlighted earlier, helps compare different types of programs and interventions to look at their efficacy on a given issue area and I think is easier to discuss and more compelling to people who might not have as in depth of a background looking at program evaluations generally.

I think the approach this study took of really breaking down looking at the specific program benefits to different stakeholder groups really helps us in framing and discussing with local partners what the benefits would be running an AmeriCorps program, and by having these individual ties to different

program benefits really lets us listen to local stakeholders, understand what they see as their interests, and really emphasize the points where we know AmeriCorps has a benefit and can really back that up. The other piece and yeah, really building off of what Scott was sharing earlier, being able to speak the benefit to the members and their fact that this does, serving with AmeriCorps programs, leads to longer term increased wages, decreased unemployment really hopefully can help on the recruitment front, I think that's, Scott, just a critical challenge so many of our programs have faced. We do have staff position dedicated to help with recruitment and I think as people consider serving, certainly they are committing to a lower living allowance amount for the year. Emphasizing those longer term benefits, I think it can be helpful on that front as well.

I think as we've seen more and more of these ROI studies come out, it really helps us frame when we're talking with our state commission partners at the state government level. They many times did some work in Minnesota. They were very effective at using their both evaluation and ROI research to help leverage additional state investments in these programs to really help bring these programs to scale and replicate programs that had a really significant return on investment. I think there's wide varieties of ways we can use this research in the field, again, to really help bring successful models to scale, to share ideas and promote learning across the region and to help on the recruitment front. Yeah. I want to thank everybody involved in this. I think it's incredibly important analysis and we greatly appreciate the effort on this front. And I will, yeah, hand it back off to Emily.

Emily McDonald: Yes. Thank you so much, Ben. Hi everyone. Thank you for joining. My name is Emily McDonald and I'm a research analyst at the Office of Research and Evaluation where I have the pleasure of working on these ROI studies. I'd like to welcome back all of our panelists to start our Q&A session. You can feel free, a few people already did, to put your questions in the chat, I'll be monitoring that or you can always raise your hand and I can invite you to come off of mute. Sharon wrote, I'm curious to hear more about the methodology for how you estimated cost benefits of ecosystem services. Also, when you were estimating future discounting of ecosystem services based on regrowth, did you take climate change into account? Can the ICF team speak to this?

George Voigt: Sure, I'm happy to take that one. When we were looking at ecosystem service values, one of the things that's particularly challenging is that the literature is limited in regard to what values have been monetized, what values are attributable to a source population. And so what we try to identify are studies in the literature that effectively are similar in geographic scope to the project region that we're looking at so that there's an applicable transfer of value from the study to our project. And then additionally, we want to make sure that in their methodology the quantification of these ecosystem services is robust. Looking at peer reviewed literature from credible journals is our go-to location and then we sort of disaggregate further and further out to see if there are specific questions that we still have that can be answered. And to your point

about the discounting of ecosystem services, we haven't looked at climate change specifically in this study. I think it's something that we're very aware is going to be a pressing issue moving forward, and as soon as we have robust quantification methods for incorporating that sort of landscape change into some of these models that we're running, we certainly will do so.

Emily McDonald: Thank you. We have another question. I love the perspective of potentially using the studies to match waiver potential as your work involves conservation on public lands. I'm curious if other federal agencies have heard of this study and the findings and reached out to learn the ROI process and about the program. Lily or Ben, would you like to speak to this?

Ben Miller: I'm not aware of which agencies have been in dialogue about this study. It has been recently published. I'm not sure that we know yet. But Lily, have you heard?

Lily Zandniapour: I think we have been sort of tapped for information by different federal agencies, not necessarily in this specific area, but folks who are trying to start off doing ROI work and sometimes just the first steps of getting into this space is a little difficult. We try to share how we've approached this work and try to make it a little bit less intimidating just to encourage folks to start doing this work. And also hopefully we can leverage everything that we have and have more connections with other agencies that are working in the specific areas where we have done this work to think about potentials that we can see in the area, as Ben mentioned, of scale up of initiatives, perhaps using national service as a facilitator of those scale up in areas where we see synergies with the work that we are doing and other federal agencies are engaged with, also philanthropy really, hopefully we can make these connections.

Both to get the studies out and to use them as basis for partnerships, for program development and expansion. Really that's our goal with this initiative. And I just want to say that the partnership with ICF has been particularly generative, really insightful, and the team of experts there have been just fabulous to work with. I think that there are lots of potentials there. I still see this as an emerging area of work, so we have to do quite a bit to get the information out there. These webinars are one way that we try to do that, but hopefully we have more strategic approaches in the future to get the information out and sort of reach our goals with this work.

Emily McDonald: Thank you, Lily. Ryan wrote, this is great. Thank you, Ryan. Regarding the methodological approach and some approaches to ROI analysis, there is a focus on isolating the incremental benefit or the benefits that would not have accrued in the absence of the investment, i.e., the delta. ROI is then calculated primarily in the context of that incremental slice. How much has that approach informed your work, and what are the challenges you faced if you do discover incrementality?

George Voigt: Sure, I'm happy to take this again and then I can pass it to Dominic for some other sort of high level comments. I think one of the ways that we have tried to incorporate this specifically with the NCC study is identifying that the baseline of post burn ecosystems is not that they remain barren for years into the future. And so the benefits need to be discounted. And so one of the ways that we've been trying to incorporate that active delta, that active baseline measure to compare your impact results to is a combination of the program level evaluation studies that are critical to identifying a statistically significant impact of the program and their activities, as well as within the literature. What are ways as we're building our model that we can actually incorporate some of that uncertainty into sort of what's happening over the 30-year period that we're modeling and also how robust is the certainty of our estimates within what we're generating.

Dominic Modicamore: Yeah. And also I think that this is one of the reasons why we do the three ROI estimates based on the length of time that benefits will accrue. We recognize that we try to be as robust as possible and use evaluations that are as robust as possible, but we do recognize that there could be some of that incremental differences that may not be completely related to the program. We do the three scenarios based on how long those benefits will accrue. That was our thinking behind developing the three scenarios.

Emily McDonald: Lily, did you raise your hand? Go ahead.

Lily Zandniapour: Yes, I just wanted to touch on this question also and say that we have tried, when possible, and that we have program impact evaluations that are done using very sophisticated designs that basically establish causal impact and show that the outcomes and impacts you see are attribute itself back to the program. To use those studies to make sure that we are accounting for that incrementality. Sometimes it's hard to do those types of studies in some of the spaces that we are looking at, especially in certain focus areas. It is more difficult to capture those incremental stuff that really can be attributed back to that specific investment. I think our strategy is to really go, if we can, to the most robust type of studies and that, in part, depends on the space and the type of intervention, the multitude of programs and contributors that are involved.

I think this is an important consideration, but it shouldn't debilitate us from trying to also look at different other novel ways of sort of approximating, so to speak. I think where those impact evaluations exist, these are easier, you can be more confident that this is exactly kind of that incremental impact capture. When there's not, it's a little bit more of an approximation. I also want to sort of put this out there that these types of measurements, it's not a one and done. You have to keep improving on them as better measurements become available, as better data sources become available. I think there's a lot of education to be done around that aspect in that you want to build a portfolio and then keep doing these measurements and hopefully you can make sure that readiness for it exists and we keep just improving those measurements.

But I think what is very encouraging is that ICF has helped us with their independent lens to really do the best and use more novel strategies that we never really even dreamed of being able to implement in these studies. That's really exciting and I think opens new frontiers, which is really great.

Emily McDonald: Great. We have time for one last question. Do you have any additional tools, literature or resources that you can share which other conservation course can use to make their own ROI estimations?

Ben Miller: One resource that comes to mind is the study itself. If you go to the ROI page of americorps.gov, you'll find research briefs and the full studies. And each full study has a lengthy appendix that really breaks down the methodology step by step. And I think that for another conservation corps program, reading that appendix in detail would likely get you pretty far in terms of taking a similar approach to measuring your own program's ROI. Other colleagues may have additional resources to share about.

Dominic Modicamore: The only thing I would add is that we measured specific activities that NCC does, so there could be variations in the program design and so forth. But I think looking at that appendix, I agree it would get you pretty far developing your own ROI methodology.

Lily Zandniapour: ICF has also done an ROI of the Washington Conservation Corps, which is another study that can be referenced, and we are sort of building on that trajectory and hopefully we'll have more and more to share in the future.

Emily McDonald: Great. Thank you all so much and we hope you will explore the rest of our ROI studies. I'm going to hand it back over to our learning officer, Katy Hussey-Sloniker. Katy, are you with us?

Katy Hussey-Sloniker: Hi, I'm here. We're now at the close of our webinar. We would like to thank Dr. Zandniapour, Scott Scherbinski, the ICF ROI project team of Ben Miller, Dominic Modicamore, and George Voigt for their presentation, Ben Olson for his thoughts on this topic and Dr. Emily McDonald for her facilitation. To our audience today, our hope is that you found the topic informative for your thinking and that you learned from our discussion. Also, thank you to our Mathematica and Guardian of Honors colleagues for their technical support and coordination. This webinar and support materials will be posted on the americorps.gov website under impact webinars within the coming weeks. Please feel free to share with your colleagues and networks. We will also be sending out a post-webinar survey, so please let us know your thoughts on this webinar and any ideas for future webinars. If you would like to reach out to the Office of Research and Evaluation, feel free to use evaluation@cns.gov. Thank you and have a wonderful day.