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Greening the Prison-Industrial Complex

By [BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL](#)

Reuters Solar panels on the grounds of Ironwood State Prison near Blythe, Calif. Several prisons and jails around the country are pursuing green upgrades.

Instead of reporting to the laundry or the kitchen or the boiler room, a Washington state prison inmate, Robert Knowles, [reports to the compost heap](#). Mr. Knowles is taking part in a “green work” program at the [Cedar Creek Corrections Center](#). Inmates grow organic produce, compost the prison’s food waste, take part in ecological research [projects with a nearby university](#), and even produce honey from the prison’s own hives.

The Washington State Department of Corrections boasts [34 LEED-certified facilities](#), with [923,789 square feet of LEED-certified space added in fiscal year 2008 alone](#).

Washington is not alone. It seems several states are busy rethinking the old concrete-box approach to prisons — home to more than two million Americans — and high on the agenda are energy efficiency and other “green” upgrades.

This fall, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation announced [16 new green retrofitting projects](#), which they estimate will save \$3 million in energy costs each year. The state already has solar power fields at two facilities, and plans to build six more in the coming year. A new \$176 million juvenile detention facility in Alameda County — home to Berkeley and Oakland — recently became the country’s first [jail to receive LEED gold certification](#).

Other green projects — from wind turbines to biomass boilers — have been announced by Departments of Corrections in [Virginia](#), [Nevada](#) and [Indiana](#).

Mike Callahan, the physical plant director at the [Putnamville Correctional Facility](#) in Indiana, says the facility’s biomass boiler alone, which burns scrap wood from the prison’s pallet industry, has saved \$6,300 a day in gas bills.

And the opening, in 2005, of Federal Correctional Institute No. 3, in Butner, N.C., marked the first [LEED-certified federal prison](#). Scott Higgins, chief of design and construction at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, said that all new projects — including new federal prisons in the works in Alabama, Mississippi and West Virginia — will be LEED certified, “unless some really weird things show up.”

Ken Ricci, of [Ricci Greene Associates](#), is currently working on a new \$120 million [detention center](#) in downtown Denver, which the company plans to submit for LEED

certification.

“There’s a recognition that sustainable, or ‘green’ design, is actually a plus for a population that’s confined 24 hours a day,” Mr. Ricci said. “Environment cues behavior. If you treat people like animals, they behave like animals.”

Mr. Ricci, who heads a sustainability committee as part of the American Institute of Architects’ [Justice Architecture](#) group, says design elements that earn LEED points, like daylighting and access to views, also improve security. “If you treat them like human beings — that is to say, there’s daylight coming in, the noise level is at a normative level — therefore your adrenaline level goes down, therefore your stress level goes down, the inmates feel safer.”

Still, not everyone thinks the new trend in prison design goes far enough.

Raphael Sperry, an architect and green design consultant based in San Francisco, is heading up a [Prison Design Boycott Campaign](#) at [Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility](#). “Sure, saving 50 percent on energy when you’re locking people up is a savings,” he says. “But not locking them up at all would be a larger savings — and would also address social justice concerns.”