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The News Tribune, Tacoma, WA - Friday, November 14, 2008

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NEWS

Tacoma, WA - November 14, 2008

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McNeil Island prison saves waste – and money

Recycling, retrofitting and other 'green' practices save taxpayer money – more than \$630,000 a year.

IAN DEMSKY; ian.demsky@thenewstribune.com
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Enlarge image



LUI KIT WONG/The News Tribune
Inmate Michael Daniels separates plastic and paper at McNeil Island state prison last month. The prison recycles about 330 tons of material a year, for an annual savings of \$69,000 from selling it and not paying to haul it off to a landfill. The facility also recycles food scraps and compostable paper products.

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LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE
McNeil Island state prison inmate Fred Bailey reads bundled cardboard for recycling last month. Among its many such "green" initiatives, the prison even plans to recycle inmates' shoes, shipping them to a Nike facility in Oregon to be converted into bouncy ground covering used on playgrounds.

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These days, it seems like everybody's trying to "go green." That's true even for places like McNeil Island prison, where some new environmentally friendly practices are helping to save taxpayers a different kind of green.

Over the last year or so, the Steilacoom facility has slowed its passenger ferries, cut back on the number of trips barges make, started collecting food waste for composting in addition to other recycling, and retrofitted the state prison with more energy-efficient light fixtures and heating systems.

The facility also has switched to less toxic cleaning products, and plans to recycle inmates' shoes.

Prisoners even pick up and process recycling for 40-odd families that live on the island.

And while these efforts might be nice for Mother Earth, they're also saving taxpayers more than \$630,000 a year, prison officials say.

"The sustainability program is the right thing to do," said prison superintendent Ron Van Boening. "If we're going to be good stewards of state resources, we have to use them wisely."

State Department of Corrections spokesman Chad Lewis said the work at McNeil is part of a systemwide effort.

"We're always looking for ways to be more efficient," he said.

For example, the Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Thurston County, was able to enact measures that conserved its wastewater enough to allow the facility to expand without a costly upgrade of its treatment plant.

"DOCs across the country have really been looking at what we're doing," Lewis said.

FERRIES AND BARGES

McNeil has three passenger ferries and three barges, which haul vehicles and materials to the island. Making more than 20 trips to and from the island per day, they transported more than 500,000 passengers and 15,000 vehicles in 2007.

To save fuel, prison officials have slowed the boats, shut them down between runs instead of letting them idle, and eliminated some of the trips.

Visitors and employees going to the island have seen their 20-minute trip lengthen by a couple of minutes, but officials estimate the conservation efforts will save 2,100 gallons of diesel fuel per month.

At \$4 per gallon, the savings add up to more than \$100,000, about 3 percent of the \$3.45 million the prison spends on fuel each year.

"Because of the nature of the island, we're a huge consumer of diesel fuel," Van Boening said.

The prison also is changing the way it gets its diesel delivered. Instead of coming by barge from Seattle, it's ferried on tanker trucks from local suppliers, which will save up to another \$160,000 per year.

"There's a big price difference between Seattle and Tacoma," Van Boening said. "That number adds up very quickly."

RECYCLING AND RETROFITTING

McNeil, which houses about 1,270 inmates, has a recycling operation that keeps its plastic, paper, cardboard and metal from ending up in landfills.

The facility recycles about 330 tons a year, officials said, saving about \$69,000 a year both from selling the scrap and not paying to put it into a landfill.

This year, the prison also started recycling its food scraps and compostable paper products. Data from the first month of the program show the prison is keeping about 1 pound per inmate per day out of the landfill.

Over a year, it's estimated that the recycling program will add up to 230 tons, reducing the trash produced on the island by about 25 percent and saving another \$7,000.

The prison has also undertaken a \$1.5 million project to retrofit its light fixtures and heating systems so they're more energy-efficient. Together they'll save \$300,000 in electricity and heating oil costs per year, a savings that will put the project in the black in less than five years.

OTHER 'GREEN' TOUCHES

McNeil also plans to join a program to recycle inmates' shoes into bouncy ground covering used on playgrounds. The inmates each go through about 2.3 pairs of shoes per year. Shipping the shoes to a Nike facility in Oregon for recycling doesn't save much money, but officials say the benefits to the planet are also important.

In May 2007, McNeil started using 100 percent recycled paper, officials said.

To help meet national accreditation standards, McNeil also is using "green" cleaning products that not only are less toxic to the planet, but also less dangerous if they were

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