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Post, prison share unique goal

Kelly McGrath/Northwest Guardian

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The relationship might be an unconventional one, but together Fort Lewis and the Stafford Creek Correctional Facility share a common goal — restoring native prairies.

The grasses native to the prairies, which are primarily located at Fort Lewis, have been crowded out by invasive species. Stafford Creek offenders began the reintroduction process of indigenous prairie grasses by sowing five different types, while Fort Lewis will later receive the cells and plant them in an on-post nursery.

Prairie-grass reintroduction is only one of several ongoing sustainable prison projects in Washington.

“It’s a partnership between (the organizations) but more fundamentally, I think it’s a partnership between prisons and nature,” said Jeff Muse, the project manager from The Evergreen State College.

The college, along with the Nature Conservancy Partnership, developed the four-way collaboration to work on a variety of sustainable projects at four state prisons — Cedar Creek, McNeil Island, Stafford Creek and the Washington Corrections Center for Women.

The idea behind using the prisons is simple — inexpensive labor in a controlled setting, while giving offenders the opportunity to make a positive impact.

“It’s not enough just to tell people what to do; we have to show them why it’s important,” Muse said.

There are currently 20 offenders working on the prairie-restoration project. Their job is to place thousands of plugs into single holes, fill them with dirt, press them down and place the dirt over the seeds.

“It’s a lot to do; it’s a lot to keep track of,” said Stafford Creek offender Toby Erhart. “But it’s really well organized for it just being the beginning.”

Over the next few months, the goal is to complete 200,000 cells containing species such as Oregon sunshine, western buttercup, Missouri goldenrod, hookedspur violet, harsh Indian paintbrush, aspen fleabane, wholelead saxifrage and field chickweed.

By fall, the cells will be planted into a five-acre nursery bed at Training Area 3 on Fort Lewis, where they’ll grow and continue to be harvested for more seed production.

“We’re trying to do restoration on a much larger scale,” said Rob Gilbert, a Fort Lewis biologist. “Over the next five to 10 years, we hope to have between 50 and 60 different species.”

The restoration project is bringing changes to more than just the prairie lands.

Offender Mark Traxler said working on the sustainable project has opened his eyes.

“It’s a good feeling,” he said. “I didn’t know how much this affects nature. There are butterflies that depend right on this plant, and if they don’t have the plant, they don’t exist.”

Traxler said he only has a few months left at Stafford Creek and plans to pursue an education after he gets out.

“This just got added to my list of options,” he said about sustainability and conservation.

With sustainable practices growing more common in the prisons and on Fort Lewis, things are looking positive for projects like prairieland restoration. But Muse warned that the window to make a change is closing.

“We’re going to have to act fast,” Muse said. “If we just sit around for four or five years, we won’t have a chance.”

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