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## To cut food waste costs, Washington prison turns to worms

The image of millions of wriggling worms might make some squeamish, but Washington state's department of corrections says using the critters has helped cut costs of food waste disposal in prisons.

By Donna Simpson, *Guest blogger* / January 31, 2014



The Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington state is using worms to reduce food waste disposal costs.

Kelli Bush/Food Tank

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The Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) is a partnership founded by the Washington State Department of Corrections and The Evergreen State College. Their mission is to bring science and nature into prisons through

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ecological research and conserve biodiversity and reduce the environmental, economic, and human costs of prisons by inspiring and informing sustainable practices. Food Tank will be sharing posts from SPP, highlighting their in-prison gardening programs. These programs grow produce for the prisons' kitchens and local food banks, and bring beauty and diversity to the prison yard.

The Monroe Correctional Complex is using worms to reduce food waste disposal costs while also providing a meaningful science and sustainability education and work program for offenders.

Currently at 5 million worms, the vermiculture program can process 10,000 pounds of food scraps per month, resulting in a cost reduction of more than 25 percent. This translates into big savings for the prison, which previously spent US\$60,000 a year on food waste disposal before several sustainability initiatives began.

In January of 2010, staff and offenders developed the vermiculture program by collecting just 200 red wiggler worms (*Eisenia fetida*) for three small breeding bins built by offenders. Very little funding has been invested in the program. As the worm population grew, new and improved models of worm bins were built by converting discarded barrels, old laundry carts, food carts, and recycled mattress materials. This indoor commercial-sized "Wormery" currently has more than 170 worm bins designed and built by offenders. Seventeen of the bins are "flow-through" style. The flow-through bins are primarily built from re-purposed materials by offenders, whereas they would typically retail at more than US\$5,000 each.

This program provides other benefits, including the by-products produced by the worms. Worm castings (worm manure) are a valuable, high-quality organic fertilizer sought after in the organic gardening market. The "Wormery" also produces 400 gallons of worm tea fertilizer per week. The worm castings and worm tea are used in the several acres of gardens at Monroe Correctional Complex.

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Studies have shown that offenders who participate in horticulture programs while incarcerated have a lower rate of recidivism. Offenders develop important vocational and life skills. The worm technicians at MCC wrote an operations manual that is now available to assist other institutions in starting new vermiculture programs. They have also developed an extensive breeding program capable of exporting worms to other Washington institutions, agencies or schools. Thus far, Washington State Penitentiary and Stafford Creek Corrections Center have received worms as a result of this program.

*This is the third of five articles on Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) is a partnership. This blog post was written by the administrative assistant at Monroe Correctional Complex.*