

Sustainable Operations

Founded by The Evergreen State College
& Washington State Department of Corrections



Sustainable Operations in Prisons

Prisons are essentially small cities, operating 24 hours a day. From housing and food service to programs and industries, they can be resource-intensive and very costly. But we can lessen their economic and human impact. With the help of corrections staff and inmates, we can make prisons more sustainable. Instead of wasting resources and human potential, we can invest in them.

Proof of Concept

As closely managed residential institutions, prisons can be centers for innovative practices—we can widely promote sustainable practices, closely monitor inputs and outputs, and track changes over time. Washington State Department of Corrections (WDOC) staff and inmates seek expert advice on sustainability, and rigorously test new methods. They are resourceful, accountable, and inventive, and we work continuously to capture and disseminate their innovative protocols. We believe sustainability programs should be a part of every institution's operations, and we aim to set the standard.

Growing Commitment

In 2002, WDOC responded to Governor Locke's directive to conserve energy and water, limit and recycle waste, and construct green facilities. Today, SPP builds on this commitment. We support, evaluate, and refine sustainable operations and share best practices widely. We assess long-term operational trends, and set new goals and strategies for improvement. We empower inmates with direct responsibility for programs. As a team, we have reduced annual expenditures by approximately \$4 million annually.

At the end of 2014, WDOC launched new tools to aid this work: a statewide sustainability policy, and an online resource use database. Statewide attention and dedication to sustainability continues to grow; inmates, partners, and corrections staff at all levels initiate and champion new initiatives.

Sustainable Operations Outcomes

The state of Washington incarcerates nearly 17,000 adults in 12 prisons. To offset the potentially enormous environmental and economic impacts of these residential facilities, every prison has committed to waste sorting, composting, recycling, gardening, water and energy conservation, green purchasing, and more. In the early years, SPP took on many of the "easy" reductions and programs, and made great strides. In recent years, we have challenged ourselves to keep improving, and the results are impressive. Comparing 2009 to 2014, we have:

- Reduced total carbon emissions by an estimated 42%
- Reduced all transportation fuel consumption by 35%
- Decreased total facility heating and energy consumption by 13%
- Decreased annual potable water use by over 100 million gallons
- Composted more than 1,900 tons of food waste, four-and-a-half times more than in 2009



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When we first began efforts to reduce waste in 2005, we still sent 7,479 tons to the landfill; in 2014 we sent only 3,325 tons statewide—a 56% reduction!

On-the-job Education

We incorporate technical and conceptual education for everyone working in sustainable operations: inmates, staff, students, and scientists. Some examples include:

- Encouraging inmate and staff participants to pursue their educational and research questions, and providing the support they need
- Creating clear education goals for inmate technicians; whenever possible, formalizing achievement of those goals with certificates (some colleges accept certificates for academic credit)
- Promoting SPP programs and practices within the prison community with presentations, interpretive signs, and information sheets
- Asking and answering questions, appreciating diverse expertise and experience, and learning across differences

Inmates often share that they are proud of saving resources and money. They see many benefits to this work. From an inmate growing crops in a prison garden:

“You learn a lot from it. You take home a lot. Not only is this information and knowledge beneficial for the environment, it is also beneficial for our lives. We take this information back and grow our own gardens, or go out there and get a job in the green economy and be able to give back to society in a positive and productive way.”

The Green Track

Inmates stand to gain the most from job training and education, and we aim to maximize these benefits. Incarcerated men and women will be our future neighbors—97% will release from prison. Our mission is to help them become successful community members.

Our vision is to create progressive programs for green jobs and education. Statewide, we are increasing programming so that inmates leaving one sustainability program have further options for sustainability education and job training. We foresee a suite of offerings that allows inmates to build impressive resumes in sustainability while incarcerated.

Photos: Benj Drummond & Sara Joy Steele (front, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th), Jody Becker-Green (top), and Airway Heights Corrections Center staff (bottom)

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