

The Buzz on McNeil Island

June 19, 2019

By [Rachel Friederich](#)

DOC Communications

McNEIL ISLAND – The environment on McNeil Island is quiet and serene. There’s no traffic. The only sounds are wind rushing through the trees and the occasional caw of birds and waterfowl.

But deep inside the heart of the island, two structures hum and vibrate with life. Since 2018, the island has been home to some new residents: honeybees.

An inmate work crew from [Cedar Creek Corrections Center](#) in Thurston County travels to the island every other week to check on a pair of hives located in the island’s wilderness.

It’s all part of the [Sustainability in Prisons Project \(SPP\)](#). SPP is a partnership between

the [Department of Corrections](#) and [The Evergreen State College](#). It provides opportunities for incarcerated individuals to lead science and environmental sustainability programs in correctional facilities.



(Rachel Friederich. DOC Communications)

See the video at <https://youtu.be/H1r7UcAvwkc>



Cookie policy

Hear the podcasts at <https://soundcloud.com/wacorrections/podcast-buzz-on-mcneil>

SPP has programs at all 12 of Washington's prisons.

Several SPP endeavors, such as the beekeeping program, are run with [additional help](#) from non-profit organizations, schools, other agencies and community experts. For example, the [Washington State Beekeepers Association](#) provides beekeeping courses to incarcerated individuals and facility program staff. The McNeil program is also supported by the state [Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) and the department's [Correctional Industries](#).

There are approximately 60 hives at SPP sites all around the state, including the two on McNeil Island.

Program partners placed the hives on McNeil Island in 2018. The island currently houses civilly committed residents at the [Department of Social and Health Services' Special Commitment Center](#). The island has remained closed to the public since budget cuts closed the former [McNeil Island Corrections Center](#) in 2011.

Laurie Pyne with the Beekeeper's Association leads a group of professional beekeepers who travel to the island weekly between April and October to inspect the hives. Incarcerated individuals from Cedar Creek's beekeeping program often accompany the group. As a program coordinator, it's also Pyne's duty to report results from each hive visit to stakeholders.

Pyne says the McNeil Island hives are unique because they don't face as many threats as hives on the mainland due to their undisturbed location.

As an example, bees on the mainland can get exposed to pesticides. Numerous studies suggest pesticides may weaken bees to the point where they can no longer survive diseases and pests that would otherwise not kill them. Bees on the mainland also have higher risk for exposure to disease-carrying mites, which can get introduced from infected bees transported across the country for pollination of commercial crops. Neither the pesticides nor mites are found on the island.

"This is almost unprecedented," Pyne said. "I don't know of any other place that exists where there is a clean environment to put honeybees. There's no pesticide. There's no sprays that are used here so there's nothing for them to get poisoned with. So that hazard has effectively been eliminated."

Though the hives have only been up for about a year, when beekeepers arrived to inspect them in early June, the hives seemed robust. Thousands of bees flew in and out of the hive entrance. Beekeepers Association staff and the Cedar Creek beekeepers observed some larvae and a few freshly laid eggs. They also observed some honey production within a hive frame.

If the hives remain strong, Pyne says there's a possibility of splitting the hives to create more colonies, or even starting a queen breeding program.

The beekeeping program helps improve public and facility safety because it reduces idleness among inmates and also stimulates intellect & critical thinking. According to a [2014 RAND Corporation](#) report, inmates who participate in correctional education programs are 43 percent less likely to return to prison.

Pyne's also given talks at several correctional facilities about beekeeping. She says once prison staff and incarcerated individuals start learning about beekeeping, they often become ambassadors of the program, educating others about how bees impact the environment and food supply.

“We have watched before our eyes the changes these little insects have on these guys (inmates),” Pyne said. “We’ll get inmates who will stand way back there and they’ll not want to get close, and then they’ll start watching the guys who are going through the hives and they’ll inch their way closer. Pretty soon, someone is saying, ‘Can I do that, too? Can I hold that frame? Can I see what you’re seeing?’ They’re getting excited about they’re doing.”

James Resop says he’s an example of that. The 45-year-old has been incarcerated since 2014. He’s getting ready to release in 2021. He began learning beekeeping by participating in the Cedar Creek program a year ago. Maintaining the hives fascinated him so much he applied to take part in the McNeil hive project. He says interacting with the bees has helped him dispel a belief that bees are ‘bad’ insects.

“I’ve always been afraid of bees,” Resop said. “Every time I see them the only thing I’d want to do is swat them, but now I realize the importance bees have for the environment, so I’m a bit more open-minded.”