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Sustainable Prisons Project catches on

Environment: Tons of produce grown

JOHN DODGE; The Olympian

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Native plants for South Sound prairie-restoration projects take root in tiny yellow tubes, tended to by inmates in one of the four greenhouses at the Stafford Creek Corrections Center.

Nearby, other prisoners work in garden plots that produce nearly seven tons of fresh, organic vegetables annually for staff members and offenders.

The state Department of Corrections prison is one of four in the prison system participating in the Sustainable Prisons Project, an eco-friendly initiative designed to conserve natural resources, provide green-collar job training and save operating costs.

The stereotype of prisons as nothing more than negative, black holes for money and people erodes away as the sustainability projects take hold and flourish, said Nalini Nadkarni, professor at The Evergreen State College. She is the co-founder of a project that began at Cedar Creek Corrections Center near Littlerock in 2004 and has expanded to this medium-security prison, which houses 2,000 inmates five miles west of Aberdeen on an isolated hillside overlooking Grays Harbor.

“The project is quite contagious; I’ve never seen anything like it,” Eldon Vail, secretary of the Corrections Department and a 1973 Evergreen graduate, said during a media tour of the prison Wednesday.

While the colorless buildings surrounded by a perimeter of security guards and rows of razor-sharp coiled wire are a constant reminder that the facility is a prison, the programs suggest it’s not business as usual.

About 59 percent of the 1,200 tons of trash generated at what amounts to a small, isolated city is recycled, including food waste, shoes, cardboard, metal, pallets, paint, paper and clothes.

“I think zero waste is achievable,” prison facility manager Mike Tupper said.

The recycling program saves the prison budget more than \$100,000 a year, prison Superintendent Pat Glebe estimated.

The horticulture program is rapidly expanding and poised to raise about 200,000 native plants to serve as seed sources for prairie-restoration projects at Fort Lewis and other South Sound sites, Fort Lewis biologist Rod Gilbert said.

Inmate and Shelton native Toby Erhart, 47, worked deliberately Wednesday, placing seeds from showy fleabane, a summer blooming plant topped with blue-to-purple petals surrounded by a yellow center, into yellow tubes for eventual transfer to Fort Lewis. With 10 years to go on a 15-year sentence, Erhart finds some satisfaction, and peace of mind, working on the lawn and garden crew.

“I’ve been out here eight or nine weeks – just fell into it luckily,” he said.

Erhart estimated that maybe 10 percent of the inmate population thinks the Sustainability Prisons Project is important work.

“Largely, offenders aren’t educated about it,” he said.

Another workshop – outside the prison building walls but inside the heavily guarded perimeter – houses a prison bicycle repair program. Working with the Grays Harbor Lions Club, offenders refurbish up to 600 bicycles a year that otherwise would have landed in the landfill. The recycled bicycles are donated to local children in low-income families.

“It’s a really good program and a chance to give back to the community,” said inmate David Moores, 35, of Tacoma, as he worked on a brake-repair job. “I’ve got five years to go, and this helps make the time go by a little faster.”

A relatively new project at Stafford Creek is the K-9 Program. Dogs on the verge of being euthanized at area animal shelters began arriving at the prison in March to be trained as pets. They are placed with a pair of handlers at the prison who also receive training from professional dog handlers.

The first to get his green collar, which means he’s ready for adoption, was Tank, a 2-year-old Labrador-Rottweiler mix headed for a new home in Texas on June 30. Tank’s new family learned about him on the Internet.

“He was horrible when he got here,” said Landen Harvil, an inmate and dog handler from Longview. “It hurts to see him go, but it’s also exciting that he has a home.”

The inmates chosen for the dog-training program tend to be facing long prison terms.

“I don’t get out until 2040,” Harvil said. “The program is meant to help us cope with what we’ve got.”

Through 2010, the Sustainable Prisons Project partnership between Evergreen and the Corrections Department will focus on Cedar Creek, McNeil Island Corrections Center, the Washington Corrections Center for Women at Purdy, and Stafford Creek.

The goal is to expand the project to all 15 state prisons housing 16,000 inmates.

“It’s designed to save money, save natural resources and maybe save lives,” Vail said.

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