

## Reducing Waste Behind Bars

By Zachary Fletcher, Washington Department of Corrections

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The Washington State Department of Corrections is helping to conserve the environment—one spoon at a time.

Inmates in several of the state's correctional facilities are now using compostable paper spoons and reusable durable sporks, instead of single-use plastic options.

Sustainable Operations Manager Julie Vanneste spearheaded the project and has worked to bring more sustainable practices to the department through the elimination of single-use plastics.

Since 2010, the department has worked to reduce the single-use plastic consumption throughout the state's facilities in the form of water bottles, plastic cutlery, and trash liners, according to Vanneste.

### History

Governor Jay Inslee signed Executive Order 18-01Adobe PDF document file in January 2018 under the name of State Efficiency and Environmental Performance, or "SEEP." According to the executive order, "a cross-agency Governing Council shall adopt and implement clear and

workable standards, measures, targets, and tools necessary to support agencies in making emissions-reducing choices.” The order ensures that agency leaders are responsible for various sustainable activities including zero-emission vehicles, new facility construction, and clean electric energy.

At one of the recent SEEP meetings, Governor Inslee asked about single-use plastics throughout the state’s agencies. He wanted to know the current use and what could be done to reduce plastic consumption.

The movement to reduce single-use plastic utensils has been gaining traction in recent years. For example, Starbucks, which has more than 28,000 stores in more than 70 countries, announced in July, it would remove plastic straws from all of its stores by 2020, according to a report by National Public Radio.

Seattle has also passed a law to ban plastic straws and utensils, becoming the first major U.S. city to do so, according to the news organization Axios. This adds to a growing list of cities and states with bans of single-use plastics like shopping bags or cutlery: New York City; Miami; Fort Meyers; Boston; Chicago; Los Angeles; and San Francisco. Additionally, California and Hawaii have enacted state-wide plastic bag bans.

Internationally, the movement continues, as Axios reports that the EU, the United Kingdom, Vancouver, B.C., Scotland, India, and Kenya are some other members of the plastic ban movement beyond the United States.

### **Plastic Bottles No More**

Vanneste has spearheaded the project and has worked to bring more sustainable practices to the department through the elimination of single-use plastics.

The department is working to fully remove plastic bottles from vending machines across the agency. “A recent inquiry shows that most facilities have successfully transitioned their vending machines away from plastic beverage containers facility wide. This is the goal,” Vanneste said.

According to Euromonitor International, an international market research company, humans purchase up to 20,000 plastic bottles every second and up to a million per day. Additionally, The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Marine Debris Program finds that plastic bottles take up to 450 years to degrade naturally into the environment. By the year 2050, research shows that there will be more plastic in the ocean by weight than fish.

Two facilities, Stafford Creek Corrections Center (SCCC) and Larch Corrections Center (LCC), are paving the way for plastic bottle alternatives. Vanneste said SCCC is using cartoned water in their facilities to reduce plastic bottles. Additionally, Evergreen Vending, the vending machine contractor at LCC, provides water in aluminum cans via their partnership with CannedWater4Kids, a non-profit that works to bring clean and safe water to kids worldwide.

Recycling the plastic also poses difficulties for the department and others trying to be environmentally sustainable. Plastic bottles contain PET, or polyethylene terephthalate. PET is a form of polyester that is strong and lightweight, which makes it cheap and easy to

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include in many forms of packaging, according to PETRA, an association representing producers of PET.

PET is cheaper to landfill when compared to recycling, says Vanneste, making it more likely that bottles end up in a pile of trash rather than a repurposed plant. "Recyclers do not want it," she added.

### **Filling the Trash with Something Better**

Another way the department is incorporating environmental sustainability in its facilities is through limiting the use of trash can liners. Each trash bag thrown in the garbage adds to the growing amount of plastics making its way into the ocean.

According to Vanneste, SCCC has saved more than \$50,000 by reducing trash-liner use, while LCC and Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC) have also documented significant financial savings from reducing single-use plastic consumption and using liner-less trash bins.

### **Cutting the Environmental Costs of Cutlery**

One of the largest efforts by the department to reduce single-use plastics is through cutlery. Sporks and bowls have always been issued to inmates for meals, but new compostable spoons and reusable sporks minimize the department's plastic waste output while still providing the necessary mealtime utensils.

In April 2010, Secretary Stephen Sinclair, who was then working as superintendent at Washington State Penitentiary (WSP), began to make cutlery used in prisons more environmentally friendly. Each incarcerated individual was issued an "orange, washable spork to use during mealtime." The reusable durable spork replaced single-use sporks and eliminated the need for the single-use plastic all together.

Sinclair's actions came long before other facilities enacted their own cutlery measures, and before the current straw ban movement and plastic bag bans began popping up across the globe.

Since then, facilities across the state have begun issuing their own reusable cutlery. Airway Heights Corrections Center (AHCC) implemented the same practice in 2015. Coyote Ridge Corrections Center (CRCC) and MCC followed suit in 2016. As of summer 2018, all facilities have, in some way, enacted reusable cutlery in an effort to reduce single-use plastic consumption.

### **Renewable Energy and Beyond**

The agency is also utilizing solar energy as a way to save money and make prisons run more efficiently.

One such initiative is the new Solar Select Program from Avista, an energy company providing service to residents of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

The program has "a renewable energy program that allows Avista's commercial and industrial electric customers, in Washington state, the unique opportunity to acquire solar

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electric and associate Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) with no additional cost.” Solar energy currently serves AHCC.

### **Continuing Environmental Support**

Single-use plastic reduction is an initiative that the Washington State Department of Corrections is taking to work towards the governor’s executive order on environmental sustainability. Working alongside with the Sustainability in Prisons Project, the department focuses on many forms of sustainable practices including, gardening, animal husbandry, prairie conservation efforts, and restoring Taylor’s Checkerspot butterflies to name a few. From eliminating plastic water bottles, to minimizing trash liner use and employing reusable cutlery during mealtimes, the department is taking action to live up to the governor’s executive order and Washington state’s broader commitment to saving the environment.

*Zachary Fletcher is currently a student at the University of Puget Sound. Fletcher was a summer intern while authoring the article. He has a passion for sustainability and the environment. Fletcher is a dual major student in Politics and Government and Communications.*

### **Comments:**

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1. *Unisan UK* on 10/08/2018:

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**How about incentivising in-mates to recycle. Something like the CafeCrush reverse vending machine - housed in a secure area of the correctional facility. For each returned can, paper cup or plastic bottle, the in-mate gets a paper voucher which they can redeem against items in the commissary. CafeCrush as recently worked with Coca-Cola and Costa with huge success. Read the press releases here. <https://www.unisanuk.com/page/press-releases/69/>**

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