
Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps kicks off summer season of outdoor work

MARY CALLAHAN

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Just three days into their new summer jobs, Brianna Cossey, 16, and three of her schoolmates from Windsor High already have experienced a cross-section of field work — pulling invasive ludwigia from a local waterway, cutting back brambles around power poles and, on Wednesday, digging heaping mounds of sediment from a drainage ditch at Spring Lake Regional Park.

The cubic yards of soil piled up one spadeful at a time.

But despite the clearly intense labor, the teens toiled cheerfully under an overcast sky, clearing a culvert that had backed up during winter rains, causing the ditch to overflow.

“We just kind of joke,” Cossey said of the banter the teens used to pass the time, her own movement with the shovel easy, despite her slight build. “I think it’s awesome that we’re helping the environment.”

The group was working under the supervision of the Center for Social and Environmental Stewardship, part of a crew of roughly 80 young people taking part this summer in the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps, an 8-year-old job training program that has provided work experience to more than 1,500 young people.

Summer participants don work boots and gloves and head outdoors to sites around the county to clear creek beds, build trails, remove invasive plants and work on other public projects that benefit the community and the environment.

For their labor, they’re paid \$10.50 to \$12.50 hourly, depending on experience, and counseled about essential job skills, including communication, punctuality, problem-solving, maintaining a positive attitude and interviewing for work, said Candace

Messner, environmental specialist with the Sonoma County Water Agency, which helps sustain the program.

This summer, it is open to young people aged 16 to 24.

In one workshop, the participants are assigned fictional jobs and families and required to confront the kinds of financial realities that one might face in future life, organizers said.

But the program also offers exposure to a variety of outdoor tasks. Because the impact of their labor is generally quite visual, the jobs can prove to be a rewarding experience.

Cossey's crewmate Augustín Flores, also 16, said it was great to know the work he was doing contributed positively to his community.

"And I love nature. I love being outside," he said.

Other sponsoring agencies involved in the Ecology Corps include the county's Human Services Department, the Workforce Investment Board, the county Office of Education and a Sebastopol-based nonprofit group called New Ways to Work.

Participants are employed and supervised by the Center for Social and Environmental Stewardship, Petaluma People Services Center, Social Advocates for Youth and the West County Community Services.

The crew members are assigned jobs determined, in part, by their age, experience and ability to use power tools.

It is for many a first job, said Michelle Revecho, a county employment training coordinator. For those who are no longer in school but are not quite engaged in the work world yet, the job can offer experience and confidence to build a budding career, said Revecho and Mai Garrett, another training coordinator.

"They take a lot of pride in what they do, especially when they're out in the public," Garrett said. "They can point and say, 'I helped do that.'"

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly named West County Community Services.

You can reach Staff Writer Mary Callahan at 521-5249 or
mary.callahan@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @MaryCallahanB.

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