

Young and employed

Sonoma County's Summer Youth Ecology Corps finds jobs for teens



Freddy Gonzalez, left, and Theoplis Tolliver haul brush from the Santa Rosa creek along Channel Dr. on Tuesday, June 29, 2010. The crews are part of the Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps.

John Burgess / The Press Democrat

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By [STEVE HART](#)

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Erika Malfavon spent a year trying to land her first summer job.

The 16-year-old Piner High School senior applied at the mall, McDonald's and other teen employers.

"They said I was too young," she said. "Many places don't give an opportunity for youth."

This year, Malfavon was hired by Sonoma County's Summer Youth Ecology Corps, a jobs program for low-income teens. By late June, she was hacking underbrush and removing trash near Santa Rosa Creek, making \$8 an hour and learning about stream restoration.

"I think this is a great opportunity," she said, taking a break with the rest of her crew. "I like working with a saw."

The ecology corps was launched in 2009 with \$1.2 million in federal economic stimulus funds. The program is smaller this summer — less than \$850,000 was available — but it's still providing work for 160 young people.

Teens face the tightest summer job market in years, according to labor market analysts. With few positions available, the competition is fierce, said John Challenger of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a Chicago-based outplacement consulting firm.

"They're competing with recent college graduates and job seekers who have two or more years of on-the-job experience," Challenger said. Such older workers "are willing to take almost any position that provides a steady paycheck."

The eight-week county jobs program is giving work to teens who might otherwise spend their summer on the streets, said Karen Fies, who heads the county's employment and training department.

"We're getting them working and working hard," she said. "They're tired at the end of the day."

And for some of the teens, "it's adding a significant amount of income to their households," Fies said. Under federal rules, the teens must come from low-income families.

The ecology corps also is helping the environment. "They can feel good about the work they're doing," Fies said.

Theoplis Tolliver, 18, has a plan for his earnings. "I'm saving up for a car," he said.

Last week, teen crews were busy on Sonoma County Water Agency property near Spring Lake, removing fast-growing invasive plants like Himalayan blackberry that have overrun native riparian habitat.

Adult leaders supervise the crews.

"I like being outside," said Nora Milton, 15, who is in her second summer with the ecology corps. "I wouldn't like a desk job."

She's learning to use tools safely and to work on a team, said Milton, a junior at Montgomery High School. "I've made a lot of friends."

The teens are doing important work, said Maria Bernadette Torres, a resource intern for the water agency.

They're replacing invasive vegetation with native plants that shade waterways used by native coho and steelhead. They supplement agency crews that maintain creeks, flood channels and other waterways, she said.

The teen crews are not fazed by thick, tangled, thorny brush, Torres said. "They don't mind getting in there."

"It's amazing to see how hard they work," said Laura Bento, a crew supervisor with Social Advocates for Youth, one of the nonprofits involved in the program. "They all seem to be really grateful for the opportunity."

Teen crews also are building trails in parks and cleaning public beaches.

As part of the program, they get job readiness training and access to an online career

assessment tool. Two of last year's ecology corps graduates now have permanent jobs on the water agency's maintenance staff.

Most of this year's funding comes from federal stimulus and youth job training programs. The county water agency is contributing \$100,000, and Kaiser Permanente, Exchange Bank and North Bay Labor Council also are providing support.

A small amount of the funding pays for teens to fill office jobs, such as working at animal shelters, police departments and nonprofits.

"We realize the impact it has on kids," said Fies. "It will make a difference in their lives."

You can reach Staff Writer Steve Hart at 521-5205 or steve.hart@pressdemocrat.com.