

Youth Ecology Corps Provides Employment, New Skills in Hot Months of Summer

Sonoma youth maintaining parks, doing stream restoration, working at animal shelter and other local organizations

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By Angela Hart

As young people leave high school and college and compete for jobs upon graduation, one local program is aiming to give them a leg up in the workforce.

The Sonoma County Summer Youth Ecology Corps, a partnership between the Sonoma County Water Agency and local nonprofits, provides minimum wage jobs for people ages 16-21. And this year, there was a major spike in applications.

In Sonoma, 43 kids applied for the program and 27 were selected, joining another 175 from around the county.

The unprecedented number of applications underpins Sonoma County's 9.4 unemployment rate, which has forced young adults to compete with more adults for entry-level jobs.

"We weren't expecting this many people to apply; it was an incredibly competitive process," said Jim Gattis, the executive director of Sonoma County Youth and Adult Development, which is working with the water agency. This really gives kids an opportunity to earn money during off-school months, and it helps them stay out of trouble.

Officials tout the program as a win-win for the water agency and cities. In Sonoma, teens have been put to work in ecological crews maintaining Larson Park, Maxwell Park and Bouverie Preserve, a property of Audubon Canyon Ranch. Others are spending the summer learning administrative skills, working with Pets Lifeline and the Boys and Girls Club

"I really like working outdoors, and I'm learning things I never knew about the environment," said Javier De La Cruz, 18, a summer employee in the program.

De La Cruz recently enlisted in the Marines, and he's scheduled to leave this October, he said.

"This is giving me work experience and keeping me busy until I go," he said.

On a recent day, Nasario Chavez, 16, worked alongside De La Cruz, removing nonnative blackberry brush and chopping down other invasives such as fennel.

“This is a fantastic program — the kids learn about native plants and the local habitat, they learn about flood control, and meanwhile they’re helping keep the creeks shaded for fish populations,” said Marc Bautista, an environmental specialist with the Sonoma County Water Agency.

"It's so huge because they're learning things they otherwise might not get a chance to — plant identification, water and soil cycles, natural resource management," Bautista added. "We're educating them and we're getting a service in return."

“It’s definitely helping me stay out of trouble,” Chavez said. “If I didn’t have a job, I’d probably be hanging out with people I shouldn’t.”

Editor's note: The Youth Ecology Corps is open to people between 14 and 21, and runs from June 13 through Aug 5, four hours a day from Monday through Thursday.