



Conservation Corps Audits Marin Curbside Waste

By Naomi Lubick, Science Interchange Reporter

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Imagine laying out every piece of trash from your garbage can at the end of the day, every bit of plastic, paper, food, and other tiny bits of stuff. Think of all the stuff that you are sending to a landfill. Then think about how much of it might be "reduced, reused, or recycled."

That's exactly what Kimberly Fox of the Marin Conservation Corps is thinking about when she sends one of her recycling crews out to do a "waste audit."

The Marin Conservation Corps, an independent nonprofit group, has been doing waste consultant plans for Marin County businesses and schools for the last three years. Fox employs and trains almost 20 young adults, who compose teams that visit state parks, local schools, and other organizations to figure out what people are throwing away and how to incorporate recycling into each particular setting.

"We do a walkthrough, looking at every single garbage and recycling can," Fox said of the process. "Then we do a waste sort, taking one day's worth of garbage and dumping it onto a tarp. We sort it into 20 categories, weigh it, measure the recyclable materials and get a potential diversion rate" — the percentage of material a recycling program could save from the landfill.

Last year in July, the Corps sent a team to Mary Silveira School in San Rafael as part of the Greening Schools Project (in partnership with the Environmental Education Council of Marin). Principal Jeanne Casella was instrumental in getting the Conservation Corps to the school to teach the students some of the dirty details of recycling. "They helped us graph what we were doing, and we found that most of our waste is paper," she said. The Corps team helped the students set some goals, like using the back sides of used sheets of paper. "Another big category was uneaten food, food that should have gone home," Casella continued. The students did a week of "pack it in, pack it out," to illustrate to themselves and their parents how much food and materials they were using for their school lunches.

Now one of the student jobs at Mary Silveira is "café climatologist," which roughly translates to cafeteria waste manager. The students are responsible for figuring out their own recycling program, and they presented a report to the school board on what they've done to improve their waste records.

Both Fox and Casella said that Marin County kids are very aware of recycling, but doing a waste audit reinforces the whole concept. "By sorting through their trash," Fox said, "they have to think about it again. They realize that it doesn't just disappear. The landfill isn't going away. They get really grossed out, but they've always been very receptive to it."

Local businesses, like Birkenstock Footwear's offices in Novato, have also been receptive to such programs. Last year, a Corps team went through Birkenstock's trash and gave suggestions on how the company could reduce waste. On the day they were audited, Birkenstock's trash was almost 70% recyclable. The Corps' one-year report on Birkenstock's progress is due soon, and they're hoping their recommendations made a difference.

RESOURCES

If you want to make a difference, hire a team of "waste auditors" to check out your workplace or donate money for waste and recycling bins for schools or other assistance. Please contact the Marin Conservation Corps at 415-454-4554 or visit: www.marincc.org