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Northwestern Joint Regional Correctional Facility **'The Rocket' assists in composting**

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Sustainability is the last thing someone would think of when thinking of a correctional facility, but at the Northwestern Joint Regional Correctional Facility on Joint Base Lewis-McChord they are doing just that.

The correctional facility has been incorporating sustainability into their daily operations for years and it's had a positive impact on the inmates, staff and surrounding communities. Among one of their many activities, the inmates grow food for Thurston County Food Bank year-round — donating more than 6,500 pounds of food in 2016.

Currently, the correctional facility is expanding the horticulture program to capture food waste from their dining facility to add to their composting efforts.

"The Rocket" is an in-vessel composter, a self-contained, automated, agitating system to process food waste — including meat and dairy — and a welcome addition to the repertoire of projects on this working farm. It will be used by correctional facility staff and inmates to process dining facility food waste from the kitchen and uneaten leftovers from meals.

Scrapings will be transported to the outdoor location in five-gallon buckets, bulked up with wood chips in a one to one ratio, and deposited into the composter. Fourteen days later, the material will be extruded and cured before integrating back into the gardens and farm area as a soil amendment.

Remaining food waste from the correctional facility will continue to be transported to Earthworks for composting. The primary purpose of this composting operation is to provide education and job skills to the inmates while supporting the existing horticulture program.

Variations of in-vessel composting in correctional facilities is also being practiced at Whidbey Island Naval Base in Washington state, as well as within civilian facilities within the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Many pieces needed to fit into place to activate this particular education project.

"(The Standard Operating Procedure) needs to be airtight before we officially begin," said Charles (Chuck) Kentfield Jr., Clover Park Technical College, instructor of the Horticulture Program at the NJRC.

First Lieutenant Andrew Satterlee, 42nd Military Police Brigade's environmental science officer, and staff met with Joint Base Lewis-McChord Directorate of Public Works Solid Waste and Dan Watts, Tacoma Pierce County Health Department regulator, to tour the facility prior to the new composting operation becoming operational in the fall.

Vermicomposting, a process using worms, is another way the correctional facility composts. The specific species of worms, Red Wigglers, efficiently break down organic matter from farm waste such as grass, leaves and stalks.

The worms eat the material, and the resulting worm castings are a wonderful soil amendment. The gardener's mix the "black gold," as good compost is sometimes called, with vermiculite. The mixture is used in the correctional facility's greenhouses to start seeds for the next crop rotation.

The greenhouses are used to grow seedlings to plant in the outdoor gardens, aquaponics systems and hydroponics to grow lettuce and greens throughout the year. The gardeners, service members under incarceration for violating military law, earn college credits toward a horticultural certificate from Clover Park Technical College.

Instruction consists of a yearlong curriculum learning about small farming equipment, diesel engines, landscape construction, nursery management, plant propagation and identification. The inmates learn to use chainsaws, tillers and tractors as well as proper maintenance of gardening tools.

The program provides real-life skills and rehabilitation for the service members to use once released.

The correctional facility is an excellent example of how sustainability can be used to enhance the mission, save money and improve quality of life. Sustainability goals on JBLM can be worked toward by every service member and staff, regardless of circumstances or job.

Programs like those at the correctional facility demonstrate a commitment to the Net Zero by 2020 goals and plant seeds for our community and our future, in every way.

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