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'Net Zero' waste Army's new goal

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How does a military installation get to a point where no waste is going to the landfill? That's what nearly 10 installations and various partners met to discuss July 24 to 26 at this year's Net Zero Waste Progress Meeting.

Net Zero is an Army initiative championed by Katherine Hammack, assistant secretary of the Army (Installations, Energy and Environment). Fifteen installations have been chosen to participate in this pilot to achieve Net Zero Energy, Waste and Water. Joint Base Lewis-McChord was officially chosen for Waste and Water; but installation leaders decided that with JBLM's strong energy program, the challenge of NZ Energy could be achievable as well.

JBLM is working on developing two more Net Zeroes, Air and Land. With the last two additions, JBLM will match the goals of its entire Installation Sustainability Program with the Army's Net Zero initiative and again lead the way in sustainable planning and development.

Colonel Thomas Brittain, then-JBLM commander, touched on the need for community engagement and partnerships during opening remarks, to assist in becoming a Net Zero installation.

"The partnerships will keep the momentum we need with this Net Zero approach to how we take care of everyone who calls our military installations home, he said."

Partnerships and engagement with the community were common threads that would be carried throughout the three-day conference. All participants agreed that these two things were important keys to reaching Net Zero by 2020 — the challenge put forth by Hammack and her team.

Many installations have events to educate and get service members and families involved. JBLM sponsors several each year: Earth Week in April, Public Lands Day in October, and America Recycles in November. These bring out the family for some low- cost, fun education while helping JBLM to achieve Net Zero by 2020.

Involving children is important to preserving our natural resources and retaining sustainable habits as they grow up.

Partnerships have been vital to JBLM's success in achieving net zero waste. Currently the installation has a nearly a 65 percent diversion rate. Partners like the Defense Commissary Agency, LeMay, Inc. (JBLM's waste management contractor), and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have been instrumental in advancing the installation to this high rate of waste diversion. For example, Janet Landon, manager of the Lewis Main Commissary and a JBLM recycling champion, and her team has led the store to reach an 82 percent diversion rate and a savings of \$154,694 in waste disposal costs in 2011.

Hammack also stressed the importance of the installations working through the problem of decreasing waste disposal and increasing diversion, with solutions that are scalable; those working locally and Armywide, but can be tailored to fit the needs of military operations in theater.

"When you look at our mission in Afghanistan we're looking at fuel as our biggest challenge — getting (fuel) into theater and moving it around. And a significant portion of that (fuel) is going to fire up our incinerators that is burning up our trash."

Hammack said that the Net Zero initiative isn't all about saving the environment; it's good business practice and helps make the military better.

“One of the great things about every net zero program we have is it is focused on reducing requirements, reducing risk, reducing vulnerabilities, improving the mission, and in many cases reducing costs,” she said. “It’s fully supported by (Army leadership) because they understand the value that this brings to the Army mission — they recognize that it’s the right thing to do.”

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