

# Kids Learn Why They're Digging Ditches

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## Sonoma County, Calif.

A summer program in Sonoma County, Calif. is helping at-risk youths and an at-risk ecosystem both find some welcome stability.

The recession was hard on young people in Sonoma County, with a one-year (2008–2009) jump in unemployment of almost 13 percentage points for 16–19 year olds and almost eight percentage points for 20–24 year olds, according to the Census Bureau.

When the county received \$1.2 million of federal stimulus funding in 2009, it matched with money from the county water agency and several local nonprofits to hire youth crews to restore and maintain local streams during the summer. Thus, the Sonoma County Summer Youth Ecology Corps (SYEC) was born. In subsequent years, money has come from water district flood maintenance funding.

It is a collaboration among the county's water agency, Workforce Investment Board and Youth Council, human services department, Office of Education, the nonprofit New Ways to Work and five youth agencies.

Crews of six to eight workers, between 14 and 21 years old, do low-skill public works projects throughout the county, mainly focusing on waterways, though tasks also include brush removal, removal of invasive species, park cleanup and habitat restoration.

"Thanks to these kids, we're able to complete work we wouldn't otherwise have been able to handle," said Kellie Noe, program specialist at the water agency. "We have a progressive stream maintenance program, but it takes a lot of time to get done, is very labor intensive, and it can only be done in a short time period."

Thanks to the nature of, well, nature, the work the youths have to do is a renewable resource, and there will always be more waiting for them each summer.

"What makes the difference from other youth employment programs is the classroom focus on either side of the manual labor," county Community Affairs Manager Jim Leddy said.

Before doing the work, youths are instructed as to the ecological importance of what they are doing through ecosystem education modules, which supplements many school curricula that don't have money or time to teach environmental science.

"We don't just give them a shovel, tell them to stick them in a stream and don't talk to them for the rest of the summer," Noe said. "The classroom instruction also helps us meet our agency's goals for water education."

The youths earn \$8 an hour for 24 hours a week working on various projects.

After the work is done, it's back to the classroom for work-readiness training and career assessments.

“Obviously the county benefits because this work is being done, but the primary focus is to help the youths develop skills for their careers,” Leddy said. “Many have never had a chance to develop résumé skills, learn what’s expected in an interview or how to look for the right job.”

After the first year with 330 participants, the following years have seen a drop and plateau in the mid-to-high 200s. The majority of participants are males between 16 and 19, though Noe has seen more females get involved this year.

Two of the former SYEC participants have graduated to positions as summer employees at the water agency, Noe said. Another, a high school sophomore, is interning in the agency’s office after two years in the field.

“You can tell it’s built and enhanced his work ethic,” she said.

Leddy also sees the program as more valuable than just getting work done around the county.

“The program is giving them a meaningful experience and helping to add to their job skill bases,” he said. “They have an opportunity to take pride in the work they’ve done and the joy of being able to earn a paycheck.”

The water agency is considering expanding the program beyond the summer to include Saturday shifts and some weekday shifts for youths who are not in school.