



The Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps

The Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps provides youth and young adults with meaningful, paid work experience, environmental education, and the opportunity to explore careers and develop work-readiness skills. Youth contribute to their community while completing environmental and conservation-related projects or working with local non-profit organizations.

The SCYEC is a partnership among a number of Sonoma County agencies, departments and local non-profit organizations, including the Sonoma County Human Services Department and Workforce Investment Board, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the County Office of Education, the nonprofit New Ways to Work, over 60 project hosts (environmental and conservation related agencies and non-profits), and five community-based youth agencies.

The SCYEC provides youth and young adults with meaningful, paid work experience, environmental education, and the opportunity to develop work-readiness skills. Youth contribute to their community while completing environmental and conservation-related projects while they develop new skills and explore potential careers.

Launched with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and Water Agency support in 2009, the SCYEC brings together a diverse group of county and non-county agencies in a program that is replicable and sustainable. For eight weeks each summer, 200-300 youth ages 14-24 work outdoors in 6-8 person crews on a range of projects in the community. Some crews of older youth continue in a year-round program. While all youth are eligible and encouraged to apply, approximately 70% of those employed are at-risk youth: those from poor families, receiving public assistance, in foster care, homeless, on probation, or at-risk of gang affiliation.

Crew work includes flood mitigation and stream restoration activities, creek clean-up and invasive species removal, trail building and general maintenance in local parks, wetlands restoration, cleaning up open spaces, and supporting sustainable community gardening projects. Projects are completed through partnerships with State and County Agencies, parks organizations, cities and towns, and environmental and conservation non-profit organizations. Environmental Educators provide workshops and curriculum on the work sites. Youth are evaluated by crew leaders on their work-readiness skills acquisition. Impact surveys are conducted with the SCYEC youth and project hosts, and a formal evaluation of the summer program is conducted each year.

Leveraged investment is a core sustainability principle employed by the SCYEC partners. With a foundation of committed support from the Water Agency and Human Services Department, the program is supported with resources from Federal, State and Local sources (including the Workforce Investment Act, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, flood mitigation taxes), the Agricultural and Open Space District, Regional Parks, City Parks, the Gang Prevention Task Force, the Fish and Wildlife Commission, private foundations, and donations from civic organizations, local businesses, and individuals.

The SCYEC model is being replicated on a more modest scale in a number of communities on the west coast. Workforce partnerships with the Eastern Municipal Water District, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Portland Metro, East Bay Regional Parks, and others are providing opportunities for youth and young adults in year-round and summer programs. The SCYEC partners are actively seeking to assist additional communities in the application of the Youth Ecology Corps model.



You Can Launch your own Youth Ecology Corps!

The Sonoma County Youth Ecology Corps (SCYEC) is an evolving effort, piloted in the summer of 2009 and now supported by a broad-based partnership among the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Sonoma County Human Services Department, Workforce Investment Board and Youth Council, the Sonoma County Office of Education, New Ways to Work, and a number of governmental and private non-profit organizations with educational, youth development, or environmental missions. The SCYEC employs 200 to 300 youth ages 14 to 24 to work in crews on habitat restoration, stream and park maintenance, flood protection, and other conservation-related and community projects for six to eight weeks over the summer, with some older youth continuing to work year-round.

How do I start a Youth Ecology Corps in my area?

To get started, simply contact New Ways to Work, the facilitating partner for the SCYEC, and they will work with the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board, and the Sonoma County Office of Education to help identify and connect you with potential partners in your area.

How do I pay for the Youth Ecology Corps?

Communities can explore leveraging existing funding sources or apply for new funding to support a SCYEC. In Sonoma County, the effort is supported by a growing range of funding sources each year. Core to the effort are water district flood maintenance funding, Workforce Investment Act funding (initially ARRA Summer Jobs allocation), other governmental funding, philanthropic support, and local contributions. You can also explore other youth or ecology focused funding, along with economic development and workforce development sources focused on green jobs, or public funds targeted to assist disadvantaged individuals.

Who do I involve in the Youth Ecology Corps effort?

The SCYEC is a partnership effort, leveraging the common ground found in the missions of a number of key agencies and organizations. Core partners include your local Water Agency or other Public Works entity, the Workforce Investment Board and Youth Council, and the County Office of Education and/or local school districts. Identifying a visible and respected civic leader with a strong ecological and/or youth work background to take the lead on launching the SCYEC can be valuable, as is engaging a facilitating intermediary to help coordinate the partners and support the program. Key to successful implementation is partnering with other ecological or conservation-related organizations and agencies and youth workforce development organizations. Elected officials, other community leaders, and representatives from education, probation, juvenile justice, social services, foster care, gang diversion, and youth-focused institutions should be engaged to elicit their support and involvement early in the process.

Why are the Youth Ecology Corps partners willing to help you?

There is strength in numbers. The SCYEC team is looking for partners in other California communities to join us in our efforts to secure a stable funding base for SCYEC programs across the state, provide meaningful summer and year-round employment for youth and young adults, and interest a new generation in pursuing careers in the environmental and conservation-related fields. This past summer, pilot efforts were successfully launched in Riverside and Marin Counties.

Where do I go to learn more?

New Ways to Work is available to support agencies interested in learning more about launching a SCYEC in their community. New Ways can also provide technical assistance and direct support to those interested in implementing a Youth Ecology Corps program.

For more information, please contact:

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