

# Bighouse Goes Green

Santa Cruz Jail at fore of state prison recycling push



Blaine Street Jail inmate Lisa Allison dumps compostable material in the Green Waste composting bin outside the County Jail during her shift working in the jail kitchen on Wednesday. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

By **KURTIS ALEXANDER**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Malea Smith says she's always been one to pick up litter, but not really one to compost her food scraps or use silverware that biodegrades.

Until she went to jail.

A month and a half into her stint at the Santa Cruz County can, Smith is among the inmates on kitchen duty, helping put in place an ecologically-motivated recycling and composting program.

"A lot more than I thought is recyclable and compostable," she said, as she grabbed a bowl made of corn starch — biodegradable, of course — for the evening meal of spaghetti and meat sauce.

While schools, city halls and businesses have grabbed a lot of attention for going green lately, behind concrete walls and security checkpoints, detention facilities have been

harboring an environmental ethic, too.

"We're recognizing the fact that we need to be more eco-friendly," said Laurie Maurino who works at High Desert State Prison in Susanville and serves as president of the state's Association of Correctional Food Service Affiliates.

State and local laws are pushing incarceration facilities to embrace "greener" products and procedures across California, says Maurino, as is the rising cost of sending trash to the landfill.

"Recycling keeps the dump bills down," she said.

The Santa Cruz County Jail, at 259 Water St., is ahead of the curve.

The facility, which houses between 300 and 400 male inmates and includes adjacent women's quarters, has long put recycling bins in the bunk rooms and separated cardboard on the loading docks.



Deputy Jorge Robinson empties a recycling bin in one of the units at the County Jail. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

But this year, efforts to divert waste from the garbage cans have extended to the kitchen, where jail officials say at least 50 percent of the facility's trash is generated.

For Smith and her fellow inmates, that means using biodegradable materials, instead of plastic, to serve the meals



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and a bit more calculation when preparing them.

"It took me a couple days to get used to all the sorting," said Corinne Leahy, of Santa Cruz, as she chopped lettuce for a salad with dinner and carefully discarded food waste in the new bins for composting. "But it's not hard to do, and it's the right thing to do."

Diagrams of what can be recycled and composted hang on the kitchen walls. Officers periodically inspect waste buckets to make sure the trash is separated properly. And the head cook is known to dive into dumpsters to fish out stray recyclables.

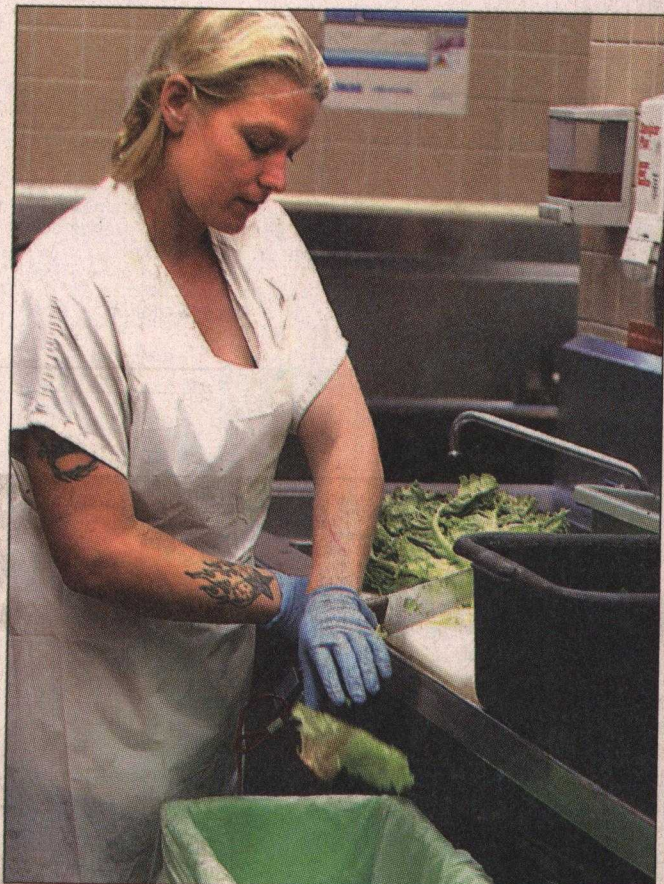
Tim Sanford, the jail's food services manager, says the facility now sends four trash-filled dumpsters to the landfill each week, compared to nine in the past.

The price of the kitchen's new program, according to county reports, is an extra \$361 a month, about a third more than the materials budget was last year, plus a little extra effort on the part of the residents. But it's worth it, says Sanford.

"You can't keep putting things in the landfill forever," he said. "[And] the inmates seem to take pride in the program. It seems to give them something to feel good about."

In addition, the recent efforts don't compromise the taste of the food.

"We still prepare food the



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Blaine Street Jail inmate Corrine Leahy throws organic matter in the compost pail as she prepares salad for lunches at the County Jail.

same — fresh," said 17-year veteran cook and county employee Kyle Taylor, who said the brig's favorite dinner is burritos with rice and beans.

Tim Goncharoff, the county's waste reduction coordinator, says he didn't know how much a jail could contribute to the coun-

ty's effort to cut back its trash until the program began.

"I had some doubts," he admitted. "But we're always trying to push the envelope, and this has been a success."

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