

Volunteers Vital To Ridding Our Forests of Refrigerators, Old Tires

Surrounded by just-collected rusted appliances, bags of household garbage, tires and other discarded waste, Ada Takacs, coordinator of the Department of Natural Resources' Adopt-a-Forest program, checks another illegal dump site off her list.

There are 765 known major trash sites on public land in Michigan," Ms. Takacs said. "But with nearly seven million acres out there in just the northern half of our state, there probably are more we haven't discovered yet."

To get a better fix on new locations, DNR conservation officers are using the automatic vehicle locators (AVL) in their patrol vehicles to track trash. The AVL, which use global positioning system technology, enable the officers to identify their position and transmit it to the Law Enforcement Communications Center in Lansing.

Whether responding to a report of illegal dumping or discovered while they are on patrol, COs can "drop a marker" on trash found on public land, and be able to return to that location at a later time.

Once their investigation is completed, officers can radio the DNR's Report all Poaching hotline and provide details, such as amount and type of trash found as well as any special disposal needs. The RAP unit creates a map and e-mails the information to Ms. Takacs for addition to the state's "orphan" site list.

"The GPS technology enables us to map and track these sites much faster than before," Ms. Takacs said. "We're then able to get the word out to our volunteer groups in the area, asking them to

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help remove the illegally dumped trash before the piles multiply." She said 25 percent of all orphan sites are cleaned up each year.

Each spring, she sends individual county lists to more than 1,000 volunteer groups, including community service worker programs, seeking their help in removing trash from public lands.

Over the past 16 years, she has seen it all. "Tires, cars, trucks, boats, appliances, sofas, toilets, building materials, you name it, we've got it in our forests," she said. "People even have been known to give directions based on trash locations: Turn left at the rusty refrigerator."

Since 1991, Adopt-a-Forest volunteers have removed more than 13,000 pickup truck loads of illegally dumped household trash from nearly 1.2 million acres of public land, recycling more than half of it.

Nearly 56,000 tires have been removed. Placed in a line, these tires would stretch 23 miles and cover all four lanes of the Mackinac Bridge, with 8,000 tires left over.

The success of the Adopt-a-Forest program can't be measured simply by cubic yards of trash. It also must recognize the outstanding efforts of the more than 10,000 volunteers who have spent more than 66,000 hours to rid public forest lands of illegally dumped trash.

"The volunteers are vital to cleaning up Michigan's forests," Ms. Takacs said. "They give their time and money to protect the value of our forests."

Rich Moffit and Darin Hawes, social studies teachers at Grayling High School, started a forest cleanup effort in the area behind the school in 2004. With the help of the DNR and several parents to provide supervision, 200 students removed more than 60 cubic yards of trash and loaded refrigerators, tires, and a big pile of scrap metal to be recycled.

"It was an eye-opening experience for our kids," Mr. Moffit said. "Most of them were not aware of the problem, but following the clean up, nearly all of



Local Efforts: Seventeen volunteers helped clean up garbage illegally thrown in the forests near Castle Rock Road and East Lake May 7. Volunteers included (front row, from left) Tina Aldetson, Joshua St. Martin, Chris St. Martin, Nicole St. Martin, Barb Merchand; (second row) Dan Dean, Crissy Peck, Bill King, Tom Briggs, Kati Stanley; (third row) Kirt Stage-Harvey, Louie Colegrove, Joe Hart, Steve Christiansen, Dane Christiansen, and Kent Hanett.



Ada Takacs is the coordinator of the DNR's Adopt-a-Forest program. "Millions of people venture into our state forests each year to enjoy scenic beauty and recreational activities," she says. "Our visitors should be able to do that without stepping around refrigerators and old tires." (DNR photo by David Kenyon)

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A column from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources

them pledged to never dump trash in the woods."

This spring, the students collected another 40 yards of trash from four different forest areas.

"We even returned to last year's cleanup site to make sure it was maintained," said Mr. Hawes. "We're happy to report that we found only two small dump sites in the area the kids had cleaned up last year. It was less than one pickup load."

Mr. Moffit said the program

reinforces the concepts of citizen involvement and public participation which the students learn at school.

"The program also gives the kids a real sense of accomplishment," he said. "They are proud of their efforts, and it's great to see the kids work together as a team in cleaning up the various sites."

The Adopt-a-Forest program is sponsored jointly by the Michigan Coalition for Clean

Forests, which includes the DNR, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, the U.S. Forest Service, the Michigan Forest Resource Alliance, and many private organizations.

For more information, visit the MCCC Web site at www.clean-forests.org. Individuals who would like to report a dumpsite on public land or obtain a list of trash sites in their area can contact Ada Takacs at (989) 275-5151, ext. 2049, or e-mail: takacsa@michigan.gov.

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