

State fair wants to be greenest in the country

By **Chris Dettro**, Staff Writer

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The Illinois State Fair wants to become greener than a John Deere tractor — the greenest fair in the country.

State fair manager Amy Bliefnick said the effort to make the fair more sustainable began about four years ago.

“We’ve always been sustainable, but we never talked about it,” she said. “But we started ramping up and doing a better job of what we were already doing. And we started talking about it.”

The amount of trash generated daily by several thousand fairgoers — all of whom were probably eating or drinking something — is enormous.

“The partnership with Illinois Correctional Industries has been instrumental in working toward the state’s goal of becoming the nation’s most sustainable fair,” Bliefnick said.

Illinois Correctional Industries is a division of the state Department of Corrections that provides inmates with job skills and training to help them obtain jobs and successfully re-enter society when they are released.

“We do recycling for many small towns across the state that can’t hire a commercial recycler,” Corrections spokesman Tom Shaer said.

Last year was the first time Illinois Correctional Industries was in a full-fledged partnership with the fair for recycling, he said.

“We found out there weren’t enough barrels for all the beer cups,” he said.

So this year, Illinois Correctional Industries placed 200 trash and recycling containers on the fairgrounds, about double the 110 containers in use during the 2013 fair. Inmates fabricated blue containers from recycled 55-gallon plastic drums.

Shaer said the receptacles were more strategically placed in hopes of topping 2013 recycling totals.

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Where it all goes

Last year, the state fair recycled 12,000 pounds of aluminum, 9,000 pounds of cardboard and 5,000 pounds of plastic.

This year, the recycling of paper has been added to the mix.

Once collected from the fairgrounds, the recyclable materials are categorized, sorted and baled by inmate trainees (all women) at Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln. Recycling and redistribution companies then buy the baled material from Corrections program.

Proceeds from the sale of baled aluminum cans go to the Combined Veterans Association of Illinois, while revenue from other items goes toward the cost of training, education and materials used in the rehabilitation of offenders.

Used cooking oil goes to Vandalia Correctional Center, where it is reprocessed into biofuel used in Department of Corrections vehicles.

Some manure from the fairgrounds is used to fertilize Illinois Correctional Industries gardens.

The fair and the department have taken measures to make the fairgoing public more aware of the recycling and other “green” efforts.

Baled recyclables and some of the equipment used in the process are on display at the Illinois Sustainability Corner on the lawn of the Emerson Building. There, fairgoers can learn about new ways to “green-ify” their homes and enjoy interactive exhibits.

Various correctional facilities have displays of items made by their inmates in strategic spots on the fairgrounds.

In addition, Illinois Correctional Industries has placed a number of collection units and art pieces made from found or reused materials throughout the fairgrounds.

Growing things, too

Sustainability goes beyond recycling, however.

About 200 flower beds and 140 hanging flower baskets have been placed around the fairgrounds by the state Department of Agriculture.

More than 95 percent of the 125,000 flowers were grown by trainees at the Lincoln Correctional Center.

“I believe the state fair is about entertainment and education,” Bliefnick said. “It’s been a great partnership with Illinois Correctional Industries. They implement the recycling, and we provide the material.”

“There is a lot more we can do, and we’re taking small steps as we go,” Bliefnick added.

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State fair recycling, by the numbers

40: Inmates working to process recyclables from the Illinois State Fairs in Springfield and DuQuoin.

30: Tons of cardboard, paper, plastic, aluminum and cooking oil that Illinois Correctional Industries will participate in recycling.

12: Tons of state fair waste vegetable oil recycled.

5: Tons of aluminum recycled.

4.5: Tons of cardboard recycled.