



Focus

Litter in Washington

Litter pick up:

Each summer, Washington motorists begin to notice the familiar blue and white litterbags along state roadways. The bags are evidence of the Department of Ecology Youth Corps (EYC), a youth employment program now entering its 25th year.

The EYC employs 14 to 16 year olds in the summer months to pick up litter on state roadways and in public areas. In the past three years, EYC crews have picked up an average of 1.08 million pounds of litter each year.

In addition to hiring the EYC crews, Ecology took steps to increase cleanup and created the Community Litter Cleanup Program (CLCP). This program provides funding to local governments to prioritize litter clean up in local communities. Combined with the efforts of agencies such as the Departments of Transportation, Corrections, and Natural Resources, state officials expect to clean up more than four million pounds of litter and illegally dumped materials this year.

A small dent in a very large problem:

Unfortunately, despite the Herculean efforts of litter crews statewide, data indicate that the litter problem has been steadily increasing in the past four years. A recent report released by Ecology showed that only 25 percent of the litter on roadways is being picked up.

The report is a culmination of a legislatively mandated study to examine the litter problem. The study estimated that 16 million pounds of litter accumulate on state roadways each year. Six million additional pounds of litter accumulate in public areas, such as state and county parks and recreation areas.

Data from the litter report:

So just what is all this litter? When asked, most people think of litter as paper, aluminum cans, and fast food waste. The Ecology study revealed that the problem goes beyond those assumptions. Glass beverage containers, construction and demolition waste, organic materials such as yard debris, and tires play a prominent role in the litter stream by weight. The table below highlights some of the findings:

- more -

Washington State Litter Facts

- **65 tons of cigarette butts are littered each year on interstates, state routes and county roads. That is 260,000,000 cigarette butts – enough to fill approximately 8,600 litterbags!**
- **Approximately 535 tons of metal and plastic automotive parts are littered each year in the types of sites included in this study – 154 tons (28 percent) of which were found in state and county parks and public recreation areas!**
- **884 tons of tires and tire scraps, representing 88,400 passenger car tires, are littered each year in the sites included in this study.**
- **1,731 tons of wood debris and 1,173 tons of organics (such as yard debris, stumps and branches) are littered each year in the types of sites included in this study.**
- **More than a quarter of a million pounds, or 7,500 cubic yards of PET (plastic) beverage containers, are littered on interstates, state routes and county roads each year. While almost four million pounds of glass beverage containers are littered each year, they only represent 5,000 cubic yards.**
- **415,000 pounds of paper packaging and 136,000 pounds of newspaper and magazines are littered on interstates, state routes and county roads each year.**

State and local governments cannot reach the legislatively set goal of zero litter through cleanup efforts alone. With stakeholder input, state officials will be reviewing the results and recommendations of the litter study and developing a litter prevention strategy.

Any prevention strategy will consider use of media, enforcement and educational tools. Possible initiatives include:

- A hard-hitting media campaign to raise the public's awareness of the negative financial, environmental and social effects of littering;
- A renewed emphasis on implementation of litter laws and penalties by law enforcement agencies; and
- Inclusion of anti-litter messages in waste prevention educational materials.

References

The Washington State Litter Study summary is available on Ecology's Web site at <http://www.wa.gov/ecology/biblio/0007022.html>

To find out more about statewide litter programs, or for information about the litter study report, please contact:

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