

Change is in the air at the North Country Fair

By Maureen McGarry

As the leaves begin to turn, and their colors liven up the roadsides and neighborhoods, we are reminded of the nature's cycles. When autumn leaves fall, they pile up until they break down into the ground. In the spring and summer to follow, new life comes from the nutrients the leaves added to the soil. Reminders of cycles of life also appear as school busses full of children are back on the roads, and returning college students replace the quietness of summer in Humboldt. Life gets busier on the North Coast.

Outdoor fairs and fundraisers take place almost every weekend through the changing of the seasons. At all these events, there is a unique problem that has always been difficult to solve. At any event serving food and beverages, there are mountains of plastic, aluminum, glass, and paper that pile up after very brief single uses of these products. Food waste is an additional part of that pile.

At home, we can wash our own dishes, but at a fair we buy a drink, and then there is this empty container in our hand we have to do something with. At the upcoming Annual North Country Fair, there won't be just one pile of waste and there will be some new options. Volunteers are needed to help make it work.

"We are taking new steps at the North Country Fair," says Maggie Gainer from Zero Waste Humboldt. "We have big goals for creating awareness about this issue."

The North Country Fair will not allow the sale or distribution of single use plastic water bottles this year. To have drinking water conveniently available, Zero Waste Humboldt is bringing water coolers and asking vendors to serve water. Vendors are required to use compostable food and beverage containers.

However, what is really new is the option of purchasing pint-size stainless steel mugs made by Klean Kanteen. The mugs will be printed with the North Country Fair and Zero Waste Humboldt logos. Gainer hopes this demo project of selling refillable, rewashable, reusable mugs will encourage other events throughout the year to do the same.

"We encourage Humboldt events to transition from single use cups and to join the 'Refillable Revolution' happening at events all over the country," says Gainer. Zero Waste Humboldt includes recycling, but emphasizes prevention. "We don't see anyone as the bad guy. We are all our partners in problems-solving to prevent waste."

If fairgoers don't want to purchase a mug, Zero Waste Humboldt is encouraging the use of Earth Choice or Eco Products compostable food and beverage containers. ZWH volunteer monitors at six collection stations will help fairgoers deposit their discarded materials in the correct receptacles for "Compost," "Recycle," and "Landfill."

Volunteers are needed to take shifts at stations as well as set up and clean up. For the past two years, about 50 volunteers have signed up to monitor the six stations at the Fair and to assist fairgoers to participate in the recycling and composting.



RSVP is setting a goal of recruiting 20 new 55+ age volunteers to work at the Fair as Zero Waste volunteers. Service clubs and schools are being approached to get involved.

“One of the things that's most fun about our Zero Waste volunteer crew is it's a mixed bag of retired people, co-workers, teams, clubs, high school and college students- everyone can do it,” says Gainer.

At a Zero Waste Humboldt meeting, several experts in the waste reduction field gathered to discuss how to prepare for the Fair.

“We need to think about our organic waste and the value of it. We haul in chicken manure to Humboldt County for fertilizer. Instead of hauling it here, we need to think of our own organic waste as a local resource,” noted Juliette Bohn of Strategic Solutions.

“Compostables at fairs are made up of mostly paper serving containers and napkins. There are also food prep scraps from the vendors,” says Bohn.

All waste collected will be measured and then transported to the best processing source. Last year, Zero Waste Humboldt diverted 2,543 pounds of waste from the landfill. 17% of materials collected were recycled, and 42% was composted.

Gainer reminds us, “You can't get people to value what you can't measure. So measurement and recordkeeping are extra important at zero waste events. We have fun at the Fair, but we also know that we're really making a difference.”

Rebecca Marie Hall helped last year and is ready to sign up again. “It's always really been important to me- saving the earth and our resources. The more zero waste events we can have up here, the better.”

Volunteers will be trained ahead of time. For information on how to volunteer email zwhvolunteers@gmail.com or call RSVP at 442-3763. The North Country Fair is on September 20th and 21st on the Arcata Plaza from 10 am until 6 pm. Volunteers are needed for 2-3 hours shifts on Saturday and Sunday.

Be part of nature's cycle and help make community events waste free.

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