

Woody Guthrie Folk Festival Strikes a Chord with Recycling

Since 1997, the nonprofit Woody Guthrie Coalition has sponsored an annual festival to celebrate the life and musical legacy of Woody Guthrie, one of America's great folk music songwriters and troubadours. Held in the singer's hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma, the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival features five days of live music, poetry, lectures, and films. And, since 2004, event goers have helped the festival recycle more than 31,600 pounds of waste.

Facts at a Glance

- More than 40,000 visitors attend the festival annually.
- Volunteers are the backbone of the recycling operation.
- 35 people volunteered to collect and sort recyclables in 2009.
- The festival recycled a total 4,556 pounds in 2009.
- From 2004 to 2009, the festival recycled more than 31,600 pounds of materials.

Program Overview

Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) was an American singer-songwriter and folk musician whose legacy includes hundreds of political, traditional, and children's songs, including the popular tune "This Land Is Your Land." Guthrie traveled with migrant workers from Oklahoma to California during the 1930s and 1940s and learned traditional folk and blues songs. Many of his songs are about his experiences in the Dust Bowl era during the Great Depression, earning him the nickname Dust Bowl Troubadour.

The Woody Guthrie Coalition, dedicated to preserving the singer's legacy and music, launched the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival in the singer's hometown of Okemah in 1997. This unique festival is free to the public and is supported largely through volunteer efforts—even the musicians volunteer their time. Today, the festival draws nearly 40,000 visitors and music fans each July for several days of activities, concerts, and family fun.

Located 70 miles east of Oklahoma City, Okemah sees its population more than double during the festival, which results in a tremendous increase in the amount of waste the city has to manage. Early on, performers and attendees asked festival organizers to provide

facilities for recycling during the event. In 2004, the organizers turned to the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) for help. The department is responsible for managing waste and recycling for the state and has been a strong supporter of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Resource Conservation Challenge, a national effort to conserve natural resources and energy by managing materials more efficiently.

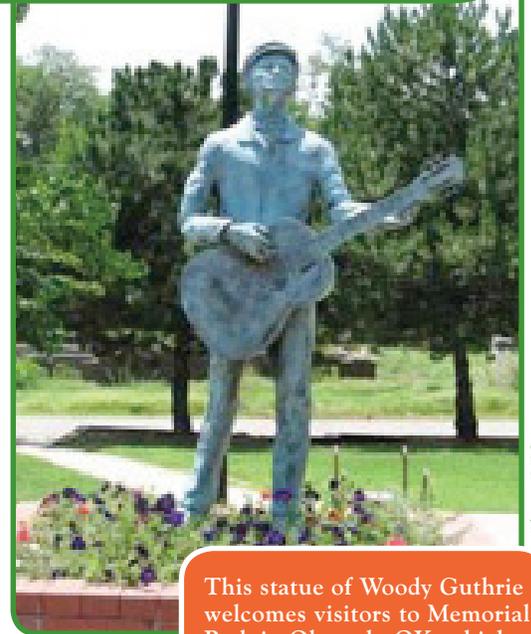


Photo: DEQ

This statue of Woody Guthrie welcomes visitors to Memorial Park in Okemah, OK, which hosts an annual festival honoring the folk singer.



Photo: DEQ

A DEQ banner at the entrance to the campground reminds visitors to recycle during the festival.



DEQ stepped in providing recycling bins, plastic bags, gloves, and department pickup trucks for transporting the recyclables. Plus, the department mobilized its staff, their families, and friends to volunteer onsite at the festival, providing manpower to collect, sort, and haul the materials to the appropriate recycling vendors. The Metropolitan Environmental Trust, the agency that coordinates recycling in the Tulsa region, lends a hand with additional recycling bins and a trailer that makes it easier to haul large loads of recyclables, reducing the number of trips needed.

Nuts and Bolts

The recycling program—like the festival itself—relies on volunteers rolling up their sleeves and working together to collect recyclables generated during the event. Town residents and visitors join the DEQ staff to collect and sort aluminum cans, cardboard, and glass and plastic bottles.

During the festival, about 50 recycling bins are placed in various locations throughout Okemah, including the campgrounds, the children’s playground, the Crystal Theatre, the Pastures of Plenty Amphitheater, and the Grape Ranch winery. Several times a day, the volunteers circulate throughout the area to empty each bin and load the materials onto the trucks. They truck each day’s collection to a staging area at the local wastewater treatment plant, where the volunteers separate out any trash and ensure that the recyclables are sorted by material for delivery to their final destinations when the festival is over.

In between recycling runs, the volunteers drive the trucks through the alleys behind the venues

collecting cardboard from the local businesses and even dig through dumpsters to find additional recyclables.

“The volunteers are not afraid to get dirty, dive through dumpsters, pick through trash cans, and work in all types of extreme weather conditions,” says Melissa Adler-McKibben, an environmental programs specialist with the DEQ Land Protection Division. “July weather conditions in Oklahoma can range from sunny with temperatures reaching well over 100° Fahrenheit to rainy

and ankle-deep mud. But veteran volunteers expect to have a fun time, listen to great music, meet new friends, and contribute to a

cleaner Oklahoma.” As Guthrie says in “All Work Together,” one of his classic songs, “If we all work together, well, it shouldn’t take long.”

Starting in 2009, DEQ began collecting each material in a separate bin, placing groupings of three bins together, each labeled with text and graphics indicating which materials it collected. Trash cans were placed near each grouping, giving festival attendees a clear choice for disposing of wastes properly. “The source separating worked very well,” Adler-McKibben says.

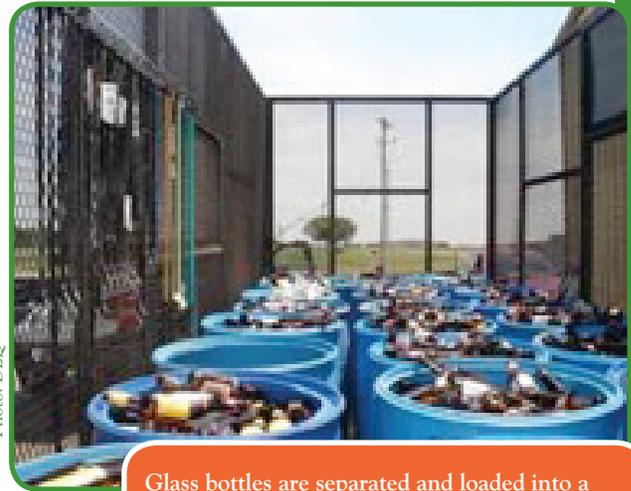


Photo: DEQ

Glass bottles are separated and loaded into a trailer to be taken to a nearby town for recycling.



Photo: DEQ

DEQ pickups are loaded daily with recyclables to take to their intended destinations.



Photo: DEQ

A volunteer is “dumpster diving” to cull a few additional recyclables from the trash.

Costs and Benefits

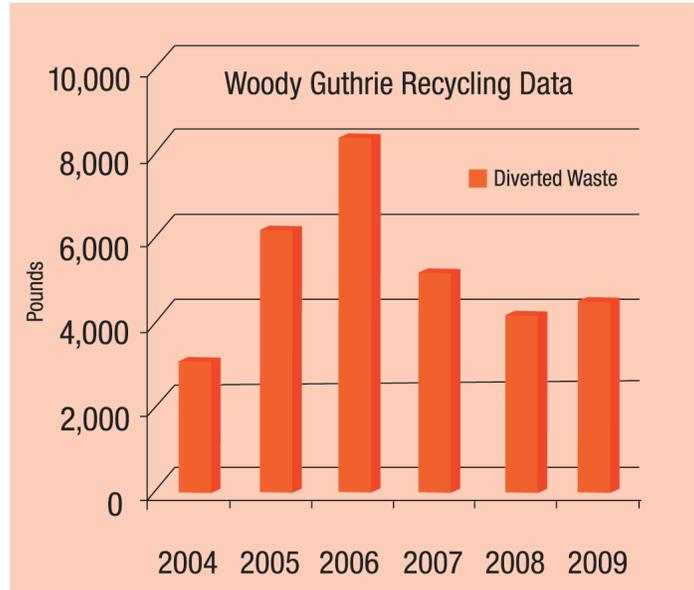
“Special events offer significant recycling opportunities,” says Fenton Rood, DEQ’s director of Waste Systems Planning. “At the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, I believe we recycle about half the waste generated.”

With volunteer labor and DEQ staff members delivering the materials to the recycling vendors, the costs for the program are minimal, but include gas and plastic bags. Any revenue generated from the recyclables—about \$90 in 2009—is reinvested in the next year’s event.

In 2009, the festival recycled a total of 4,556 pounds of materials, including 2,700 pounds of glass, 1,500 pounds of cardboard, 236 pounds of aluminum, and 120 pounds of plastic. Because Okemah hauls trash to a distant landfill, recycling can result in cost savings for the community.

The town saved about \$100 to \$150 in 2009 from avoided landfill costs, not to mention environmental fees and fuel costs. Recycling at the festival also preserves an average of two tons of landfill space per year. Plus, rather than dumping these materials in a landfill, recycling conserves natural resources and energy, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Between 2004 and 2009, DEQ and festival goers recycled a combined total of 31,657 pounds of materials. “The benefits definitely outweigh the costs when you look at the tonnage,” Adler-McKibben says.



Source: DEQ

Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: In previous years, DEQ found that, especially toward the end of the day and end of the festival, festival patrons were throwing trash in with the recyclables.

Solution: In 2008, DEQ purchased new bins with lids that have holes sized for cans and bottles, which provided another level of encouragement to help attendees choose the right bin and minimize contamination (mixing of trash with recyclables).

Challenge: Volunteers typically line the recycling bins with plastic bags to make it easier to empty the bins. However, when it rains, the bags fill up with water, making them heavy and messy to work with. Also, on windy days, before any recyclables have been placed in the bins, gusts of wind can sometimes blow the bags out of the bins.

Solution: On sunny days, the volunteers use the plastic bags and place rocks, borrowed from the wastewater treatment plant, in the bins to hold the bags in place. For rainy days, the volunteers skip using the plastic bags altogether, avoiding the water-collecting issue.



Photo: DEQ

Volunteers carry a full recycling bin to be emptied for cleanup. Note the bin’s clear plastic lid with a hole sized for inserting beverage containers.

In the Future

According to Adler-McKibben, 2009 proved a record year for volunteer participation, with 35 people lending a hand, many turning up for multiple shifts throughout the duration of the festival. Many are repeat volunteers from year to year. In addition to soliciting help through the department's intranet site, DEQ plans to advertise in the local paper next year to drum up even more volunteers.

Her advice to other would-be event coordinators: "Think about the waste that will be generated, identify your markets, recruit partners, and always remember to tap into your local and state governments for recycling assistance and information," Adler-McKibben says. "We learn from past recycling events and continue to improve upon our strategies each consecutive year. You just have to jump in and do it!"

Building on the successes with the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, DEQ is working with other event organizers to promote and expand recycling at events statewide, including the annual Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon (voted one of the top races in the country), ScienceFest Oklahoma, and the REDMAN Triathlon. DEQ is demonstrating that event recycling is good for attendees and the community. As Guthrie sang, "This Train Is Bound for Glory."

More Information

For more information, visit www.woodyguthrie.com or contact Melissa Adler-McKibben at (405) 702-5218 or madler@deq.ok.gov.



Photo: DEQ

Volunteers take a break from collecting recyclables at the campground.



Office of Resource Conservation
and Recovery (5306P)
EPA 530-F-09-027
November 2009

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