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FAIRFIELD-SUISUN CITY, CALIFORNIA

Fairfield High School students, from left to right, Valeria Barajas, Gloria Rafael and Viridiana Renteria look at creek samples from a during a biomonitoring field trip with the Solano Resource Conservation District, near the Dunnell Nature Center in Fairfield, Friday, April 21, 2023. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

Students help Solano RCD assess health of local creek

By Susan Hiland

FAIRFIELD — Students from local schools went on a field trip Friday to help assess the health of local creeks.

Fairfield High School Biology and Environmental Science teacher Heather Handa was eager for her students to get a hands-on experience in nature. She watched as they carefully made their way into the creek bed, she cheered as they reached the bottom.

“I want them to enjoy being outside and connect with living things,” she said.

Handa also admitted she wished she was down there gathering the bugs for the data samples.

“They are into it out here and my heart,” she said.

Handa has been doing this program with her classes for more than five years. The pandemic put the program on hold temporarily but they are back at it again.

Sierra Cecchini, Solano Resource Conservation District assistant program manager, assists Fairfield High School students during a biomonitoring field trip, Friday, April 21, 2023. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

This is a Solano Resource Conservation District program, which helps them get an idea of the health of the creeks and also educate students on various aspects of science and biology.

The students did a three-part assessment including chemical, biological and habitat, according to Shea Kinser, the program manager.

“We work with them in the classroom before they come out on the field trip,” she said. “We give them an introduction to the vocabulary and ecology. Then it is the hands-on experience.”

Students broke off into groups with about six people each. They put on waders before going into the Union Avenue Creek at Dunnell Nature Center in Fairfield, which is a quiet park along the creek with walking trails for visitors. Each group then grabbed a rope and went down to the creek bed where they used various tools to gather samples at separate times.

“The data is going to be part of a 15-year program study created by Pat Edwards at Portland State University,” Kinser said. “This is a long-term study of the health of our local creeks.”

The program started in 2006 and includes several creeks: Alamo Creek, Chabot Creek, Laurel Creek, Lower Blue Rock Springs Creek, Rindler Creek, Sulphur Springs Creek, Ulatis Creek, Union Avenue Creek and Upper Blue Rock Springs Creek.

Other schools involved in the research include Vacaville Unified School District, Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, Vallejo City Unified School District, Benicia Unified School Distric, and Travis Unified School District.

Sierra Cecchini, assistant program director, lead students down into the creek. She noted that they would be gathering data and analyzing it in the next week as part of the program.

“This is a great introduction for them to learn about creek health,” she said.

One of the neat things about this program is that students are participating in something that goes far beyond themselves.

“It is an exciting legacy because they are contributing to something beyond themselves,” Cecchini said. “They will leave high school in four years but their work is part of a bigger project.”

Water flows through algae during a Fairfield High School biomonitoring field trip with the Solano Resource Conservation District, near the Dunnell Nature Center in Fairfield, Friday, April 21, 2023. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

The goal of the day was to help students understand the impact they have on local waterways and how important it is to monitor them.

“It is also about getting out and doing science,” Cecchini said.

Along with the Fairfield High School students’ help, over at Rockville Hills Regional Park, third-graders from Suisun Valley Elementary School were doing their own observations.

The day included a presentation for city leaders and sponsors of the program to get an overview of what Solano RCD is doing.

“We are highlighting the work that we do in the county,” said Marianne Butler, education center director.

After the students finished gathering the data everyone went over to Rockville Hills Regional Park to see what was happening at that sight.

“This is great to get the students out and energized by being in nature,” Suisun City Mayor Alma Hernandez said.

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Fairfield High School students Asante Taylor, left, and David Jimenez look at creek samples from a during a biomonitoring field trip with the Solano Resource Conservation District, near the Dunnell Nature Center in Fairfield, Friday, April 21, 2023. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

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