

At the Williamstown Middle School in Monroe Township (Gloucester County), I'm seeing first-hand how students commit themselves to the Community of Caring Gardens environmental program. These impressive young people are creating gardens for native species, growing vegetables for the community, improving recycling efforts and making rain barrels to reduce erosion and recycle rainwater. I was very happy to announce this program as a Governor's Environmental Excellence Award winner in December.

And at the STEM-to-Civics College Preparatory School in Trenton, I'm meeting students from its environmental science classes who already know the importance of combining science with civic engagement.

This is just a small sampling of tremendous environmental efforts in schools throughout the state all year, just as a matter of course and routine. And it's very encouraging to see. What I am imparting to these students this week is the importance of continuing environmental stewardship throughout their young lives, into adulthood and to think about the possibility of careers in protecting the environment. Just as there will always be a need for environmental protection, careers dedicated to these protections are just as evergreen.

Here at DEP, there is tremendous career diversity to fulfill the core environmental missions we have put forth. Our employees have committed themselves to cleaner air as we continue to take a tough stand on pollution from out-of-state power plants while ensuring our in-state facilities meet the toughest emissions controls, all while moving our power supply to cleaner burning natural gas and supporting a strong and nation-leading solar program. Thanks to this work, New Jersey meets the EPA's health-based standard for fine particles, a pollutant that can cause serious health problems, especially in vulnerable populations.

Our staff has remained aggressive in making sure thousands of contaminated sites, from big industrial sites to small gas stations, are cleaned. We are doing this through the successful Licensed Site Remediation Professional Program, which also offers many opportunities for careers.

We are also meeting Governor Christie's commitment to restoring Barnegat Bay throughout a science-based comprehensive plan which will announce important scientific findings later this year. Some work with counties to protect hundreds of thousands of acres of ecologically sensitive areas through improved wastewater management planning. Others work for the protection and improvement of our vast network of State Parks and Forests.

And our Division of Fish and Wildlife has been working tirelessly to protect the habitat of numerous animals, from bald eagles and red knots, to the eastern tiger salamander and the Atlantic Coast leopard frog, a species that until recently was not even known to live in New Jersey. And we're finding it all over the place.

For our DEP employees, these missions come amid challenging fiscal times. But for many, their hard work and commitment to these missions are borne out of that initial passion and interest in protecting the environment as students.

So on this 45th anniversary of Earth Day, I hope we can continue to find our environmental stewards and leaders of tomorrow – for the good of the environment, for the good of their own future, and for the good of all of us who are proud to call New Jersey home.

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