

One official's crusade to clean the Del Norte County countryside

September 3, 2019



Roger Gitlin, who represents District 1 on the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, dreams of a clean Crescent City and Del Norte County, whose residents respect the land and work to retain its beauty.

And Gitlin acts on his dream.

Nearly a dozen local residents volunteered their time Aug. 28 to help with the 47th in Gitlin's line of clean-up projects titled "Take a Bite Out of the Blight."

Piles of trash, a used mattress, a broken cabinet and a load of Styrofoam littered the lush landscape in a forested ditch next to the Walmart store on the north side of Crescent City. Nearly invisible from the store's parking lot, the trash was strewn just down a hillside, where a team of volunteers packed out bag after bag.

"This really is a beautiful spot," said Elliot Schwarz of Smith River. "You look at the creek down there, you've got clean running water. It's a nice place, shouldn't be abused."

Although the crew initially planned to work across the street on a much bigger project, the volunteers had failed to acquire the correct permit to do so. As a result, they moved their efforts to the ongoing effort adjacent to Walmart.

In this particular part of the city, volunteers have removed upwards of 8 tons of garbage since 2013. They borrow equipment, such as rakes and shovels, from CalTrans, and code enforcement officers cart the trash to the county's transfer station.

"We see no shortage of trash that's been accumulated over the years," said Gitlin. "It's where we live, it's where I live, it's my home. Do I want to live in a garbage can? No, I don't."

Gitlin originated "Take a Bite Out of the Blight" when he was elected to office in 2013. "It's up to us to not just complain about it. 'Why doesn't someone do something?' Well, I do."

At times, more than 30 volunteers will show up to help; at other times, only a few. They've included probation staff, inmates, sheriff's deputies, local residents, anyone Gitlin can bring to the task.

"I want to help clean Del Norte," said Crescent City resident Penny Felming. "It needs to be done. We all live here. We all have to take care of the planet."

The projects use few, if any, county dollars.

Randal South, who has lived in the area since 1967, believes cleaning the garbage is essential to Crescent City's long-term economic survival, since much of the city's revenue comes from tourists. "Somebody's gotta do it. I mean, tourism is a very large part of the local economy and growing, and you certainly don't want tourists to see this," South said.

What's more, said the volunteers, at least a portion of the littering affects what are termed "environmentally sensitive habitat areas." The trash endangers local plants and creatures who live here, said to Eileen Cooper, who works with the Friends of Del Norte.

"These are rich, biodiverse areas," Cooper said. "It's a crime. It's a crime that's not being prosecuted."

For Gitlin, it's a crusade.