

Cleaning up the river, one tire at a time

Action Saint-François celebrates

By Rita Legault
SHERBROOKE

The river cleanup group Action Saint-François will celebrate 15 years of environmental action with a benefit show next week.

And in those 15 years, Action Saint-François has rid the St. Francis River basin of more than 400 metric tonnes of debris that was clogging its arteries.

That's a whole lot of garbage, said coordinator Robert Léo Gendron, who has been with the group since 1999, and it took a whole lot of volunteers to do it.

"When you get people involved, to get their feet wet, it raises their level of consciousness," he said, noting that was the basis of the organization.

Between 2,500 and 3,000 people have participated in hundreds of work bees that hauled out some 267,069 kilograms of metal — including cars, refrigerators and stoves; some 5,865 kilos of glass and plastic, including untold numbers of pop bottles and plastic bags; some 79,992 kilos of used tires; and some 81,263 kilos of assorted junk.

In order to do as little damage to fragile ecosystems as possible, most of the cleanup work is done by hand, said Gendron.

On a rare occasions, a back hoe is used to withdraw a rusted car cadaver from the top to disturb riverbeds as little as possible, he said.

Most of the materials recuperated over the past decade and a half were recycled, Gendron added. In the last few years, as much as 90 per cent of the scrap metal, glass and plastic were recycled.

The cleanup group has also put an accent on tiny streams and brooks which are often ignored but are important to the overall health of the St. Francis watershed.

It's made up of more than 1,000 streams, brooks and other waterways — many of which have their own hidden dumps adding to the deterioration of water quality throughout the watershed. There are also areas where serious erosion is further clogging waterways.

Recently Action Saint-François launched a new program to revegetate shorelines and prevent erosion — particularly on local farms.

Revegetation coordinator Cybelle Boucher said that this summer, along with the provincial agriculture



PERRY BEATON

Cybelle Boucher and Robert Léo Gendron: not just talk.

ministry, Action Saint-François planted some 1,500 plants at a half dozen farms along the Rivière aux saumons in Ste-Edwidge de Clifton and Cookshire/Eaton. Boucher notes that's a particularly sensitive part of the watershed, where there are water quality issues related to erosion and pesticide use.

Next year, the group will put in some 5,700 plants along that sensitive area, she said.

Gendron said the goal of Action Saint-François is not to point fingers or to assign blame. It is to act.

"There are a lot of environmental groups that complain a lot but don't do much," he said. "We're not interested in talk. What we're interested in doing something."

Gendron said the group is also about citizen participation. He notes that over the years the group has

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