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Farm receives water award

By Christine McFadden

The controversial showerheads installed across campus last year may finally be paying dividends, as the Silicon Valley Water Conservation Awards recently recognized Stanford for its achievements in water conservation. This is the first time the event has taken place, debuting at De Anza College's Kirsch Center for Environmental Studies in Cupertino. Stanford was among the eleven local businesses, agencies, organizations and individuals to be awarded.

Stanford, nominated in the "Large Organization" category, was commended for reducing its water usage from 2.7 to 2.3 million gallons per day over the past eight years through its comprehensive water conservation program.

"Student Housing, with its 4.2 million square feet of buildings covering about one-third of the campus, over the years has undertaken a number of measures to help the University conserve water," said Executive Director of Student Housing Rodger Whitney in an email to The Daily. "These include simple things such as installing flow restrictors on our faucets and changing our landscape irrigation systems from domestic water to lake water taken from various natural sources on Stanford lands, as well as putting our landscape irrigation on a soil moisture detection system rather than a traditional time-clock management system."

In the third consecutive year of a drought, California has found itself concerned with water conservation. Recently, in response to the climate change, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger called for a 20 percent reduction in water usage.

The Silicon Valley Water Conservation Awards were presented in hopes of drawing attention to those, like the University, that serve as role models for conservation.

Whitney went on to list other ways in which Stanford has conserved water, including the installation of over 2,000 low-flow toilets in all restrooms and bathrooms, low-flow sprayers in all campus kitchens and the current implementation of low-flow washing machines.

Yet even with its noble intentions, these preservative actions have not been without controversy. The installation of low-flow showerheads in all undergraduate residences last year caused a stir among students.

In response to these new showerheads, hundreds of students circulated petitions calling for their removal. Some students even went so far as to remove the showerheads themselves in a boycott that received national attention.

However, the showerheads, invented by Stanford student Jonas Ketterle '08, were one of the main reasons Stanford was able to achieve this recent recognition.

“In the end, it did have an impact on the award and the University was commended for its proactive approach to water conservation, specifically mentioning the showerheads,” Whitney said. “This measure along with other campus-wide water conservation measures undertaken by the campus utility division resulted in significant water savings across the entire campus.”

The showerhead controversy was resolved last year when Resident Assistants agreed in a campus-wide meeting to their installation with the compromise of including either one handheld showerhead or higher-flow showerhead in each bathroom.

“The reactions of a few students caused us to consider the timing of our projects and to address some peripherally related issues about shower head height,” he added. “With minimal modification, we were able to keep the installations and the net result was a considerable contribution to water conservation.”

Student housing is responsible for 28 percent of the water used daily across campus, while contributing to about 30 percent of the current overall campus water savings.

The Silicon Valley Water Conservation Awards were presented by the Water Awards Coalition, which consists of 10 local, environmentally-award organizations. Among them is Acterra, which also awarded Stanford for sustainability efforts at the Annual Acterra Awards last year.