

Sisters Folk Festival moves toward sustainability

By Ceili Cornelius
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Sustainability at events is a rising issue within the United States because of the high volume of people concentrated in one area, each one producing waste and plastic at a high volume in a short amount of time.

The Sisters Folk Festival (SFF) started in 1995 with 12 artists and 200 attendees. It has grown to a festival with over 50 artists and around 4,000 attendees every year. This year, the organization implemented a sustainability program headed by Operations Manager Dave Ehle and Sustainability Coordinator Odin Wium.

Events that sell alcohol, food and other beverages and items are particularly responsible for creating a huge amount of plastic waste due to the plastic cups and products food and beverage items are served in. Therefore, efforts by organizations and festivals are being made to reduce impact on the environment through sustainability programs.

Organizations are popping up all over that promote sustainable, zero-waste events and festivals. Bring Your Own Bottle (BYOB)

was created to make events more sustainable and plastic-free, as stated by its website: “The Sustainable Concerts Working Group (SCWG) is a collaboration of music industry leaders and environmental advocates who believe in an environmentally responsible and sustainably driven music community.”

They have a number of artists and organizations that partner and take the pledge to have festivalgoers and artists themselves bring their own water bottle or drinking device to limit the amount of use of plastic water bottles and cups. Having a water bottle with you can greatly reduce the amount of plastic water bottles purchased at events. Most festivals and events today have water refill stations for that purpose.

The BYOB initiative was taken up by the small-town music festival; SFF partnered with BYOB using social media to promote the use of reusable cups and water bottles.

Sustainability Coordinator Odin Wium helped orchestrate initiatives to assist with the festival becoming greener. Wium is a general social science major with an emphasis in environmental studies at the University of

Oregon. Wium was hired on the festival staff this year to implement ideas for a sustainability program.

The definition of sustainable is debated in academic communities, but as far as events go, according to Wium, it is about “creating a festival format that has little to no impact on the location it takes place at,” he said.

Festivals are often known for the area they take place in.

“We want to have a tangible way to show the impact on the place, and with effective waste management, we can maintain the pristineness of Central Oregon where SFF takes place,” he said.

“The idea is a three- to five-year sustainability plan, but we still reduced waste in huge ways in the first year,” he said.

The long-term goal for the festival is to become a zero-waste festival in the years to come.

In Wium’s mind, education is the most important factor because policies surrounding sustainability are always changing.

Perhaps the most popular sustainable change at SFF was the elimination of plastic cups for beer at the festival. For the 2019 festival, organizers made it so the only

way you could buy a beer was to purchase a 16 oz. stainless steel cup with the SFF logo on it (or bring your own). Each cup was available for purchase for a low price and it was encouraged to be brought to all venues all weekend for beer and wine.

They also had a volunteer team dedicated to maintaining the policies put in place with disposal of products.

“We had a designated green team to help people put the right things in the right disposal bin and orchestrate reduction of waste, and more recycling,” said Ehle.

Festivalgoers loved the implementation of the program. Long-time attendee Helen Michet said she was happy to know that others would join her in bringing their own beverage containers.

“Anything we can do to minimize the impact on the environment while also lessening the cost is something we did with the program this year,” said Ehle.

Pickathon, a festival that takes place on a farm

outside Portland, considers itself a “trash-free festival.” Pickathon is considered the “poster child” for other festivals to aspire to be like with their zero-waste programs.

Board chair of the Sisters Folk Festival Sue Boettner has volunteered and attended Pickathon for many years.

“The festival uses renewable-energy resources, like solar. They also have bike shuttles from hotels. There was also the option for attendees to bring their own dish and bottle for food and drink to further their zero-waste and sustainable model,” said Boettner.

Festivalgoers can make themselves aware of the programs and policies of the festival they are attending and carry a backpack or bag that has all your “festivalgoing” things, including a water bottle, perhaps a bowl and eating utensils, and a pint cup for a drink. As SFF Board Chair Sue Boettner said, “Every little thing helps, and one person can make a difference in these efforts.”

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