

How many plastic bottles do you use each week?

A 2006 study out of the University of the West Indies (UWI), estimates that Jamaicans use over a million plastic bottles in any given week and many of these are discarded in gullies or by the roadside, as Jamaicans do not have strong recycling habits.

One parish is on a mission to change this environmentally harmful behaviour and have its residents make recycling a way of life.

Tired of seeing the beauty of St. Mary destroyed by loosely discarded plastic bottles, the St. Mary Parish Development Committee (PDC) has been spearheading a recycling project that seeks to collect and turn them into something useful that can help farmers and the community at large.

Chairman of the PDC, Samuel Campbell, says that over the last three years, the body has been focusing on environmental issues, youth opportunities, skills training and entrepreneurship. The plastic bottle recovery project, he says, is the main activity for this year.

Mr. Campbell explains that when properly processed, the plastic bottles can be used in the making of yam sticks and lumber, "hence we believe that this is a very interesting project."

He outlined details of the project while addressing hundreds of parishioners at a Social Development Commission (SDC) Parish Forum in St. Mary last month.

The recycling project is being funded by the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica (EFJ) at a cost of \$2,046,000. It began in 2011 and was originally scheduled to end in July last year, but has been granted a non-fund extension.

The PDC is seeking further funding to acquire machinery for the shredding of the bottles within the parish rather than having to take them into Portland or Kingston. To this end, it has written to the Japanese Government and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), for support.

The shredding of the bottles in the parish will also create employment of young people.

The project has received the full endorsement of Minister of Local Government and Community Development, Hon. Noel Arscott.

“I want to commend the St. Mary PDC for its effort to pay attention to the environment. This is a significant attempt to try to rid us of one of the big problems that we have, millions of plastic bottles all over the country, choking us on a mountain of plastic,” Mr. Arscott said.

True to his commitment, the Minister has since sent 20 persons trained under the Jamaica Emergency Employment Programme (JEEP) to assist in the project. They will join four others, who are employed full time with the JEEP Secretariat.

The Minister is also promising to ramp up anti-litter activities across the island through the National Solid Waste Management Authority (NSWMA).

“We need to clean up our communities through changing our mindsets. We are currently reviewing the anti-litter fines and will be moving actively to prosecute those among us, who continue to discard waste in a wanton and careless manner on the streets, in gullies and other public spaces,” Mr. Arscott said.

In the meantime, the PDC’s plastic recycling project has been targeting schools and communities in the coastal towns of Annotto Bay, Robin’s Bay, Port Maria and Oracabessa.

Secretariat Manager for the project, Dorell Hartley, says this is to enable young people to

develop a habit of recycling and to protect the coast. She says it has been well documented that improper disposal of plastic bottles destroys beaches and coral reefs.

Mrs. Harley says the bottles are coming in by the thousands from schools, and from beach clean-up activities.

She says the NSWMA is providing assistance in transporting the bottles to a collection facility in Buff Bay, Portland.

The recycling project aims to rid the environment of non-biodegradable waste and educate the public, in particular school children, on the proper disposal of this type of waste.

The PDC has handed over dozens of drums marked 'Plastic bottles only' to schools in the parish, and volunteers have been appointed to monitor collection in the various areas.

Mrs. Hartley believes that the parish is ripe for this project. Prior to this, there was no organised collection of non-biodegradable waste in St. Mary. She notes too that at times, various groups do beach clean-ups, and because it is not sustained, the pile up continues.

"The improper disposal of plastic bottles also takes away from the beauty of the parish," she says, noting that the discarded bottles give the impression of a "dirty community".

In addition, the bottles clog drains and gullies, which results in flooding.

Mrs. Hartley is hoping that parishioners buy into the recycling project in a big way and do their part in protecting the environment.

The mandate of the St. Mary PDC is to facilitate local self-management and governance

within the parish, thereby promoting good governance and sustainable development. It works closely with local stakeholders and organisations to undertake projects and activities for the benefit of the parish.

By Andrea Braham, JIS Reporter