

ACROSS FENCE LINES

Connecting Corporate America to Communities
through Urban and Community Forestry Programs



Funded by the U.S. Forest Service

CASE STUDY

Utility and Impacts of UCF in Community Outreach Efforts

Robinson, Illinois

Introduction

The Marathon Robinson Refinery, located in east-central Illinois, has a longstanding outreach program supporting municipal and community goals dating back to company-sponsored improvement of a city park in 2005. Since then, the efforts of the Robinson Refinery's Committee for Awareness and Responsibility for Environmental Stewardship (CARES) team's efforts have expanded to four sites, including outdoor learning spaces at two local schools. Marathon's community engagement work has been recognized through Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC) Conservation Certification® and has grown to focus on STEM education at the WHC-certified forest site planted and maintained by Marathon Robinson employees. In this outreach, UCF is used as an ancillary tool to promote outdoor learning and as a platform for informal outdoor education about various conservation topics.

The Business Drivers

Business Driver 06 – Community Engagement – The effort began supporting the revitalization of a community park that the city government had identified as a priority. Enthusiastic reception from municipal partners and high interest from local educators led Marathon to expand its efforts in partnership with Hutsonville High School and Lincoln Trail College, creating additional sites for community benefit. Site managers note that seeing their own children use and learn from sites planted and maintained by their workplace has underscored the company's outstanding, ongoing relationship with residents, municipal partners and local educators.

Business Driver 07 – Investment in Education - Refinery employees cite engagement in education for the community at large as a key component of their participation and draw attention to the benefits that Marathon's efforts have brought to their own families and friends.

Alignment with Ten-Year Urban Forestry Action Plan Goals

Goal 7 - Increase Public Awareness and Environmental Education to Promote Stewardship – Marathon’s UCF efforts have produced multiple forest sites, resulting in active engagement with local educators and the creation of an accompanying curriculum promoting pollinator health, bat habitat creation and invasive species control. Marathon employees actively guide efforts to steward these sites in partnership with community volunteers, and employees, professors and students have collaborated to carry out a forest management plan. This team assists with planting native species, removing invasive species and monitoring use of the forest site by wildlife.

The Community

According to the CDC Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), the city of Robinson, Illinois scores 0.6173 on a scale of 0 (lowest vulnerability) to 1 (highest vulnerability). This score indicates high vulnerability in relation to the community's ability to respond to a natural disaster, disease outbreak or incidents like chemical spills.

An environmental justice profile according to the EPA's EJSCREEN tool identifies the city in the 70-80th percentile for Particulate Matter 2.5 nationwide. Additionally, Robinson ranks in the 80-90th percentile for its proximity to facilities with risk management plans and in the 95-100th percentile for wastewater discharge in the area.

The community ranks in the 90-95th percentile for low-income population in the country and is in the 70-80th percentile for individuals with less than a high school education.

Robinson Refinery showcases its commitment to addressing these contextual challenges by funding efforts that increase community access to existing green space and facilitating volunteer opportunities to manage the sustainability and expansion of planting sites that provide ecosystem services such as air and soil pollution mitigation and wastewater management. These local efforts also align with Marathon’s corporate-level goals of collaborating with diverse partners and showcasing community forestry’s potential to build strong and lasting partnerships in industrial communities.

Challenges

Marathon’s UCF efforts and associated educational outreach have been so positively received by community members that educators, school districts and NGOs in neighboring counties have begun reaching out with participation requests. As local interest has exceeded the capacity of Marathon employees to host programs, and employees’ time constraints prevent them from scaling up their efforts, the company is now working to redirect requests to other corporations operating near the interested parties, who may be interested in replicating Marathon’s efforts.

The sustainability of these efforts was also challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes to production and staffing levels at the refinery presented unexpected financial limitations to project growth. The impacts of the pandemic also prevented the in-person engagement of students. Efforts are underway to address pandemic-related challenges, with plans to pivot to remote offerings should these issues persist or rearise in the future.

Opportunities

Creating Value for Employees - Robinson is a small, rural community, and as a result refinery employees typically live close to their workplace. Site employees and leaders have noted the powerful benefits of seeing their outreach activities lead to forestry-based learning opportunities for their own children and within their personal networks. Employee volunteers consulted with their children's teachers early in the project planning phase, facilitating design, development and creation of sites and curricula catered toward local schools.

With employees directly seeing the positive impacts of leading UCF and education activities, high participation levels have been sustained. The Marathon CARES committee also provides a strong platform for organizing Robinson Refinery employee participation in planting, management, educational outreach and certification of the sites, enabling streamlined internal recognition of volunteer efforts.

Partners

- City of Robinson Parks and Recreation Department
- Hutsonville High School
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
- Indiana EPA
- Lincoln Trail College
- Marathon Robinson Refinery
- Wildlife Habitat Council

Key Takeaways

- The forging of strong relationships and the open-minded consultation of experts, partners and agencies throughout project design and implementation has facilitated sustained project success, with enthusiastic interest in continuation from all parties.
- Consultation with partners such as a private forester, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and local school leadership has resulted in a mutually beneficial, collaborative effort. From planting and management to engagement with students from elementary school through college, the forestry aspects of Marathon's community outreach efforts present a well-designed and impactful connection to the company's broader commitment to STEM education.

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