

# VOLUNTEER CREEK CLEANUPS

## IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY



Trash in local waterways is a top environmental and economic concern across Santa Clara County. Trash degrades natural habitats, harms fish and wildlife, and pollutes recreational fishing and boating areas. Since local creeks and rivers eventually flow to the San Francisco Bay and coastal areas, the impact of trash is widespread.

Public agencies across the Bay Area have spent millions of dollars over the last decade trying to reduce the amount of trash that reaches our waterways. Efforts include passing local ordinances to control trash at the source, such as bans on single-use plastic bags and polystyrene.

Agencies have also installed underground trash capture devices in the storm drain system to intercept trash before it reaches waterways. Even with these actions, trash still reaches local creeks and rivers. Cleanups are needed to help protect our aquatic ecosystems.

Two of the largest annual volunteer cleanup events held throughout the U.S. are **Coastal Cleanup Day** and **National River Cleanup Day**. Each year, these events are held on the third Saturday in May and September, respectively. In Santa Clara County, these events have played an important role in protecting waterways and saving local public agencies millions of dollars.



## SINCE 2007, CREEK CLEANUP PARTICIPANTS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY HAVE...



**Volunteered**  
**>100 Thousand hours**



**Saved**  
**\$2.5 Million**  
for local public agencies



**Removed**  
**>1.1 Million gallons**  
of trash from creeks

## HOW DOES TRASH REACH OUR WATERWAYS?

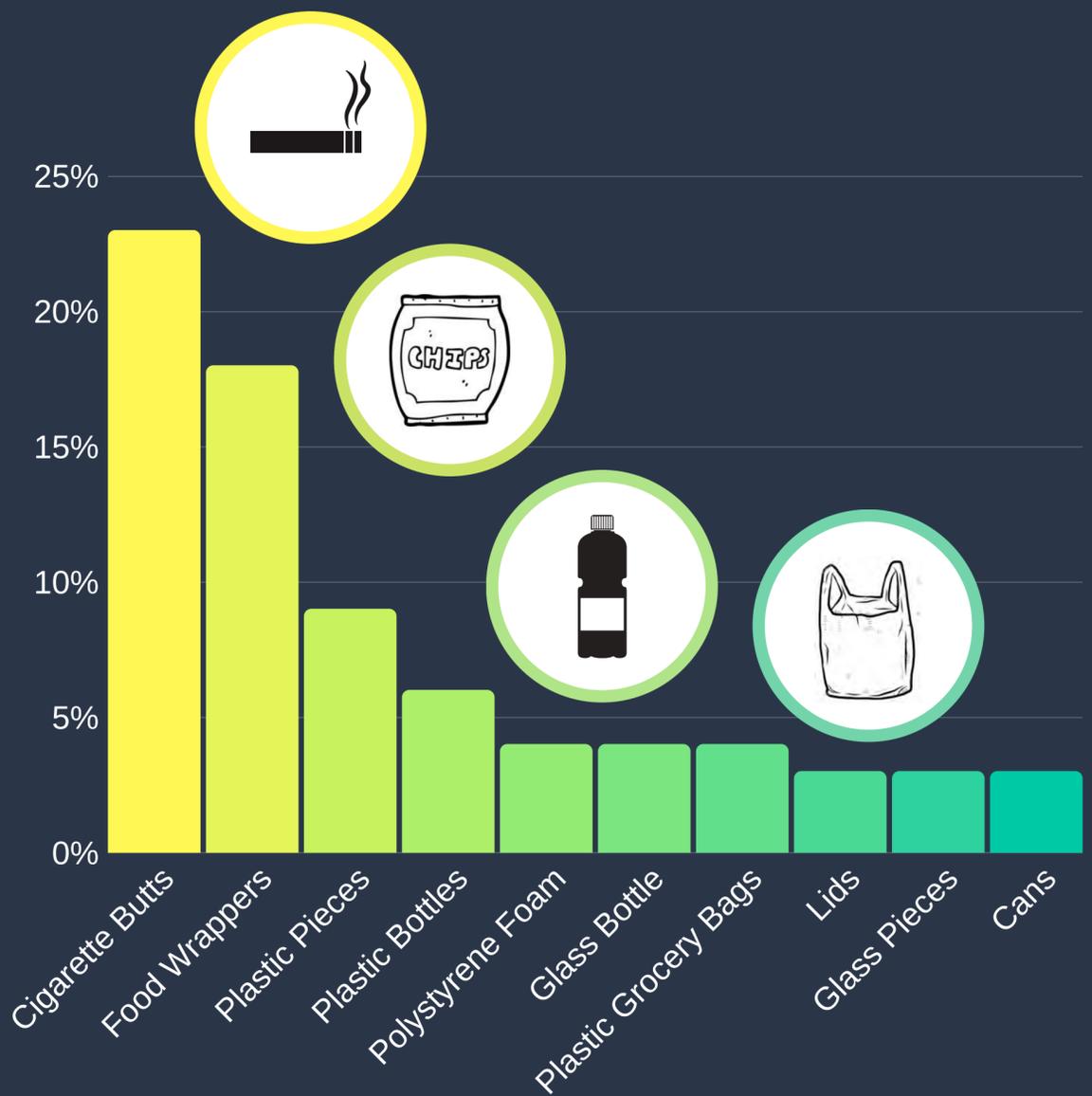
Trash enters our local creeks and rivers through different pathways. Once in creeks/ivers, this trash can then flow to larger waterways, including the San Francisco Bay and coastal areas unless its intercepted along the way. Creek cleanups serve a very important roll in protecting our waterways.



# TOP 10 TYPES OF TRASH IN OUR CREEKS

Cigarette butts, food wrappers, and various plastic litter are the most common items found in Santa Clara County creeks and shorelines. Since 2007, creek cleanup volunteers have removed over 35,000 cigarette butts during cleanup events. Not only do cigarette butts have toxic chemicals, but the filters are plastic. Plastic pollutes aquatic habitats and does not biodegrade. In fact, most of the trash found in waterways is made of plastic.

The good news is that the number of single-use plastic grocery bags in creeks dropped after local agencies enacted "bag ban" ordinances. Before these local actions, an average of over 2,100 single-use plastic grocery bags were found in creeks every year. In 2019, creek cleanup volunteers found fewer than 30 single-use plastic grocery bags.



## CLEANUPS BY WATERSHED (2007-2019)

### Watershed

An area of land that drains rainwater into a creek, river, or larger body of water.

During Coastal Cleanup and National River Cleanup Days, volunteers clean trash from 14 major watersheds and shorelines in Santa Clara County. Cleanups have occurred at 183 sites in creeks within these watersheds. On average, volunteers collect 11 gallons of trash per hour.

Watershed or Shoreline	Volunteer Time (Hours)	Length Cleaned (Miles of Creek)	Trash Removed (Gallons)	Trash Density (Gallons/1000ft)
Adobe Creek	1,890	35	14,430	105
Calabazas Creek	6,675	70	34,690	110
Coyote Creek	23,260	280	301,480	770
Guadalupe River	33,380	580	533,670	460
Llagas Creek	3,600	60	28,510	190
Lower Penitencia Creek	1,170	15	4,860	150
Matadero Creek	1,230	25	3,960	45
Permanente Creek	1,175	15	2,800	95
San Francisquito Creek	5,980	35	47,820	275
San Tomas Aquino Creek	8,315	135	35,120	70
SF Bay Shoreline	790	10	6,200	255
Stevens Creek	6,095	110	39,010	90
Sunnyvale East Channel	1,035	30	9,080	55
Sunnyvale West Channel	2,230	50	17,680	75
Uvas Creek	6,270	80	51,140	150
<b>Totals</b>	<b>103,095</b>	<b>1,530</b>	<b>1,130,450</b>	<b>2,895</b>

# IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEER DATA

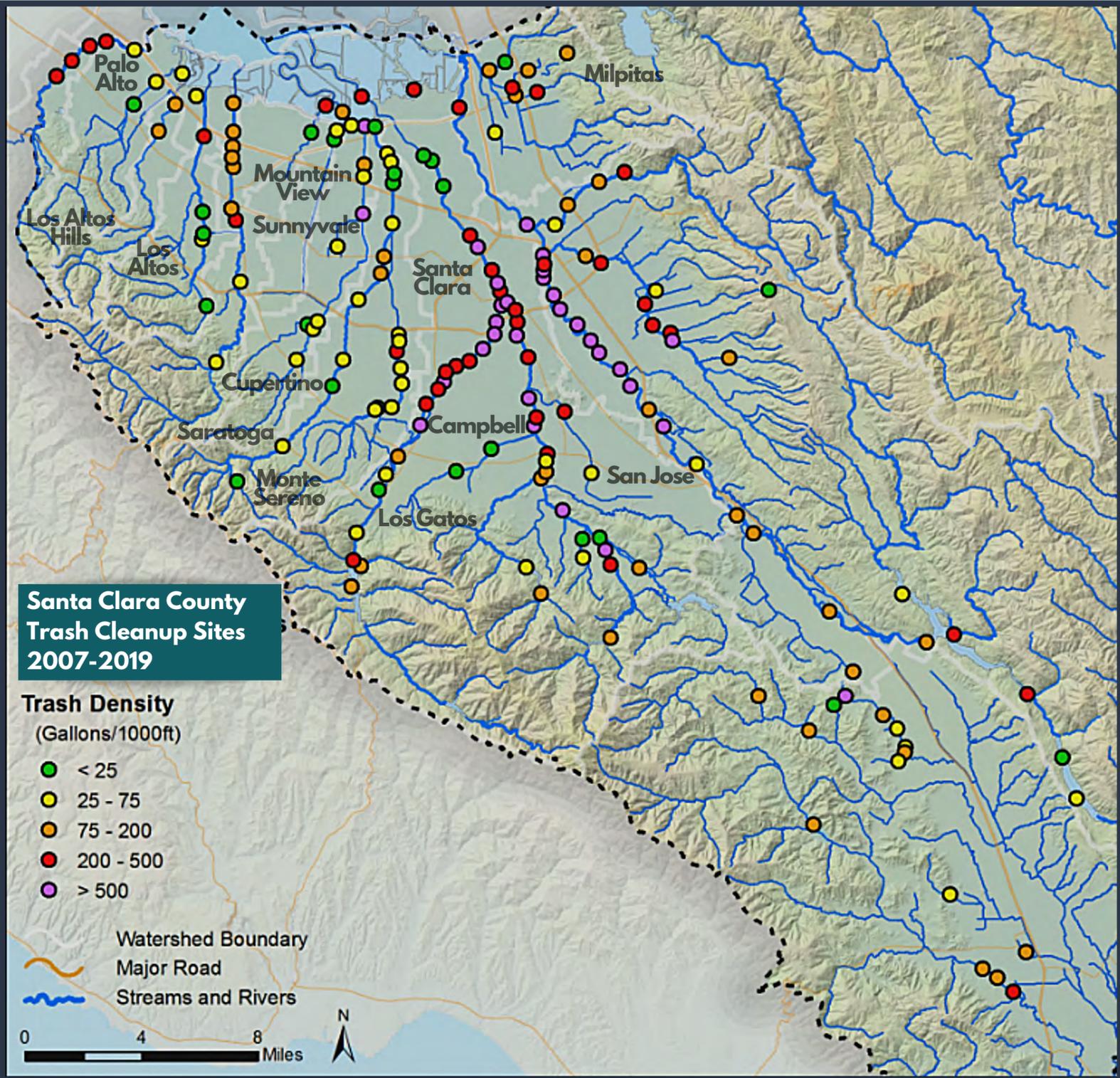
**Good data collection matters.** Creek cleanup data helps us understand the state of creeks and waterways across Santa Clara County. What are the trash levels in different creeks? What types of trash are we seeing most? How effective are cleanup events at reducing trash in local creeks?



On-the-ground information helps local public agencies better understand the impact of volunteer efforts, implement focused prevention efforts, evaluate changes in trash levels over time, and select future creek sites for cleanups. Data can also guide new actions to reduce litter impacts on local creeks and the San Francisco Bay. By continuing to gather data on the amounts and types of trash in our waterways, volunteers are helping to determine whether current actions are reducing trash impacts and inform the types of additional actions needed in Santa Clara County.

## TRASH LEVELS AT CLEANUP SITES

Volunteer data collected during creek cleanup events from 2007 through 2019 were compiled to identify which sites, creeks, and watersheds had the greatest densities of trash. Sites in the Coyote Creek and Guadalupe River watersheds had the highest average trash levels during this period, with some sites having more than 500 gallons of trash collected per 1000 feet of creek cleaned. Areas with greater trash levels (e.g., the central region of Santa Clara County) remain focus areas for future land-based trash controls, illegal dumping prevention actions, and creek cleanups. All of these actions help reduce the impacts of trash on our local waterways.

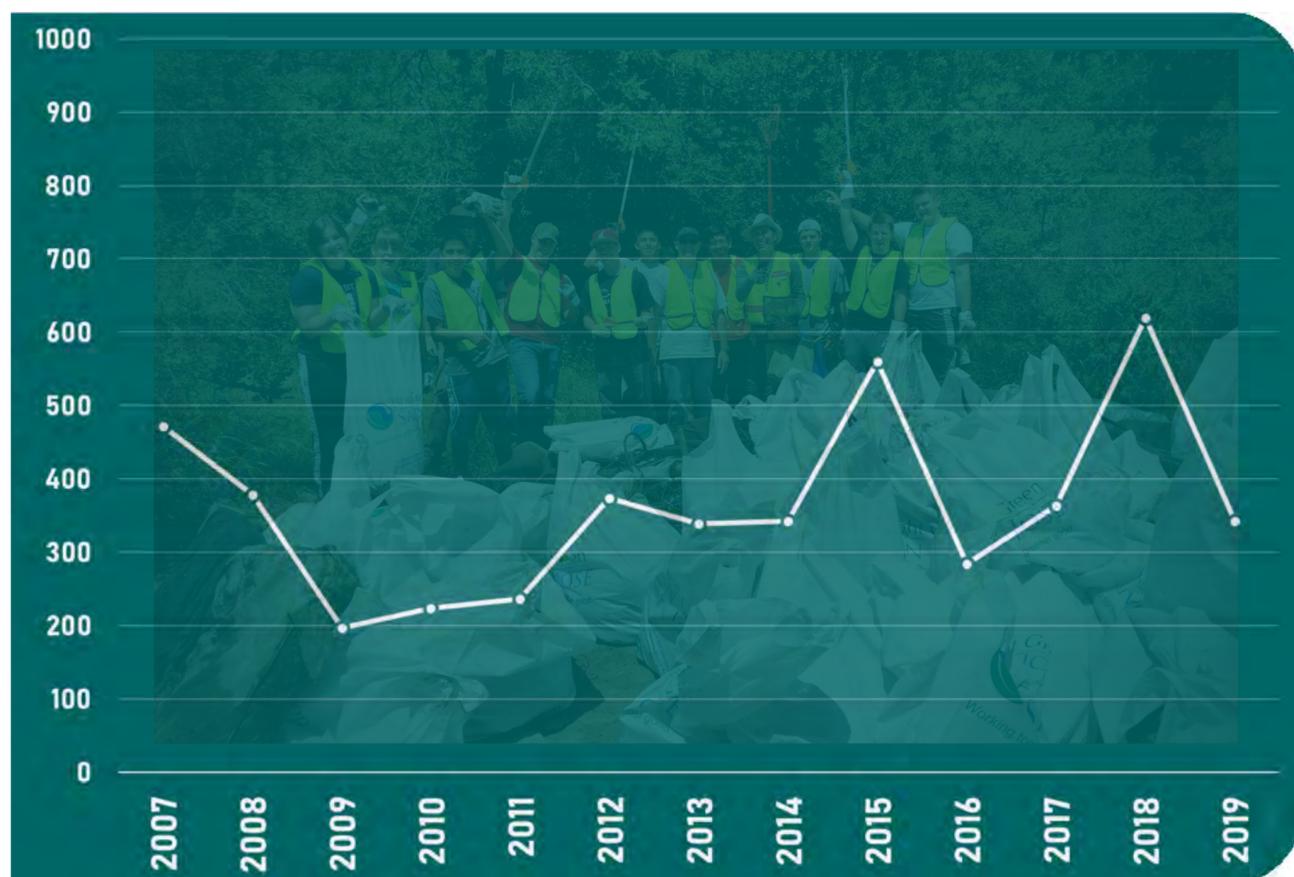


# TRENDS IN TRASH LEVELS OVER TIME

The level of trash removed by volunteers during Coastal Cleanup and National River Cleanup Days varies each year. Trash levels in the graph to the right are the average gallons of trash removed per 1000 feet of creek and shoreline cleaned in Santa Clara County.

Higher levels of trash have been removed from Santa Clara County creeks and shorelines in recent years. From 2007-2013, average trash levels ranged between 200-480 gallons/1000 feet. In the past five years, average trash levels ranged from 300-610 gallons/1000 feet.

Average Trash Level  
(gallons removed/1000 feet)



## DATA AT A GLANCE

- **How many participants volunteer for cleanup events?**

Participation in cleanup events has steadily increased over time. In the past five years, an average of 3,000 volunteers have participated in cleanup events annually.

- **How much trash is removed by volunteers during Coastal Cleanup and National River Cleanup Days?**

Trash removed by volunteers varies by site, event, and year. The highest total volume removed during a single year was 161,000 gallons (2007). The average volume removed annually between 2007 and 2019 was 86,000 gallons, enough to fill 20 dump trucks each year!

- **Do different seasons affect the level of trash collected?**

Coastal Cleanup Day occurs in the fall and National River Cleanup Day in the spring. No statistically significant seasonal effects have been observed between these events.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW TO GET INVOLVED:

Santa Clara County Creek Cleanups and Past Data | *Creek Connections Action Group* | [cleanacreek.org](http://cleanacreek.org)

Coastal Cleanup Day | *California Coastal Commission* | [Coastal.CA.gov](http://Coastal.CA.gov)

National River Cleanup Day | *American Rivers* | [AmericanRivers.org/make-an-impact](http://AmericanRivers.org/make-an-impact)

This fact sheet was created by the Zero Litter Initiative (ZLI), a subcommittee of the Santa Clara Basin Watershed Management Initiative, through funding provided by the Santa Clara Valley Urban Runoff Pollution Prevention Program (SCVURPPP). The data used to create the information in this fact sheet were obtained from Valley Water and other SCVURPPP member agencies.

