

Mackenzie McNabb

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions
(803) 952-8179, mackenzie.mcnabb@srs.gov

STEP Class Brings Science to Life at the Savannah River Site *Students Engage in Environmental Science through Education Outreach Partnership*

AIKEN, S.C. – (May 10, 2023) – More than 50 fifth and sixth grade students from [Heritage Academy](#), Augusta, Georgia, experienced a unique hands-on environmental class in the forests of the [Savannah River Site \(SRS\)](#) to inspire early interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)-based careers at the Site.

[The Science and Technology Enrichment Program \(STEP\)](#), is a cooperative effort with [Ruth Patrick Science Education Center \(RPSEC\)](#) where lessons correlate to academic curriculum for grades three through 12 and utilize real-world investigations that focus on responsible environmental stewardship.

Director of Environmental Education at RPSEC Kimberly Fickling believes every student should have the opportunity to learn from experts in the field. “We are connecting classroom standards to real hands-on activities that can spark students’ interest in STEM and careers in science,” said Fickling. “We truly bring science to life through these different opportunities.”

Attending students completed a macroinvertebrate count and watershed activity that addressed the human impact on healthy ecosystems and how pollution affects our major water sources.

“Today I learned that all organisms deserve safety and respect, no matter how small they seem. I loved examining the water scorpion up close under the microscope. These tiny organisms are so important to the health of our water systems,” said Camden Robinson, 6th grade student at Heritage Academy.



Heritage Academy student Derek Webb uses a dichotomist key to identify an aquatic specimen caught in a Savannah River Site streambed.



Kimberly Fickling, Director of Environmental Education at RPSEC [left] and Taylor Rice, SRNS Education Outreach [right] assist students in identifying macroinvertebrates under a microscope.

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STEP continues to create special experiences for students visiting the Site, which is home to many rare and endangered species. Typical topics presented include preserving the nesting habitat of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, constructing watersheds, analyzing manmade pollution and identifying freshwater macroinvertebrates in ponds and streams.

Heritage Academy Program Coordinator Westin Bobadilla believes there is a need for more hands-on activities outside of the classroom. “Having kids come out and experience these lessons is a very unique and special opportunity,” said Bobadilla. “I really saw these kids break out of their comfort zones and engage with many new scientific instruments during the activities.”

Many obstacles have challenged the operations of STEP classes. In 2020, COVID-19 put a halt to in-person classes, but the program persevered and shifted to virtual instruction. In 2022, the on-site classrooms predominately used for STEP were shut down. With special assistance from the University of Georgia’s [Savannah River Ecology Laboratory \(SREL\)](#), the program has continued using the SREL auditorium and on-site outdoor spaces.

“We are having to adapt to this change and shift our program to outdoor areas while sending larger classes to SREL,” said Taylor Rice, Education Outreach Specialist. “We would love to have our own designated facility and classroom space for education outreach to impact more students on environmental matters.”

SRS education outreach plans to continue STEP field trips to showcase the many careers at the Site, spark interest in STEM and connect with local schools in the Central Savannah River Area. If you are interested in a field trip opportunity with STEP, contact Taylor Rice at taylor.rice@srs.gov.

About Savannah River Nuclear Solutions

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, a Fluor-led company with Newport News Nuclear and Honeywell, is responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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