

Food, beverage industry confronts sustainability challenges

By TODD ETSHMAN

Sustainability programs and measures in food and beverage manufacturing are often implemented because it's what customers want or the business's leadership is committed to utilizing sustainable practices.

In today's business climate however, sustainable measures aren't something a business can expect to receive government tax incentives for implementing despite their high cost.

"We can still be sustainable but in the last few years there has not been as much incentive for companies to go green," says Kyle Whitford, senior vice president of Sweeteners Plus LLC in Lakeville.

As Whitford explains, there are incentives for solar and wind power but unless a business has a lot of land to put up solar panels and wind turbines, it's not an option, and more incentives would be welcome.

"We'd like to see more incentives that aren't restricted to the item of the day," Whitford says. There is no question that sustainable manufacturing processes can be very expensive. "Without tax incentives there is going to be less participation," he says. There should be more of a benefit for being sustainable."

Making sustainable sweeteners

Sweeteners Plus is committed to using sustainable processes in the manufacture, packaging and delivery of its sugar, corn syrup and fructose, but not all its competitors or customers who use its products are.

As Whitford explains, his company is ahead of the curve and has yearly sustainable goals, but that doesn't mean everyone else is. "We're still in a commodity driven business. It's hard to show the value to your end customers. A lot of our competitors don't do it unless the customer asks for it."

Sweeteners Plus makes sure its customers know they're using sustainable measures by bringing them in and showing them such sustainable measures as natural gas trucks that burn less fuel than diesel trucks. A challenge for transport is that compressed natural gas trucks cannot carry heavy loads.

Sweetener Plus tractor trailers have to be cleaned daily and that generates a lot of water. Non chemical hot water used to clean the inside of trailers is captured and sold to a biodigester company and an industrial vinegar manufacturer. The gray water used in cleaning the outside of trucks is treated at the company's own water treatment plant.

RIT's Pollution Prevention Institute

The logistics of implementing sustainable solutions can be a formidable task for businesses and communities to face. The New York State Pollution Prevention Institute at Rochester Institute of Technology can help. It provides guidance and assistance to many New York state businesses, including food and beverage manufacturers like Soy Boy in Henrietta and Seneca Foods facilities in upstate New York.

The Institute, founded in 2008, helps companies and communities statewide deal effectively with sustainability projects, solutions and issues. The Institute is sponsored by the state Department of Conservation and led by the Golisano Institute of Sustainability.

Its sustainable ideas and advice isn't limited to businesses. Households and individuals can find sustainable food and beverage suggestions on its Facebook page as well.

Americans waste a lot of food, even more so during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Consumer food waste is one of the biggest landfill contributors. The Institute can help households with composting and quantity of food suggestions.

Making tofu at SoyBoy

SoyBoy on Paul Road is using the institute to find ways to make the liquid byproduct of the company's tofu manufacturing process more sustainable.

The company pays over \$100,000 to Monroe County to use the county sewer system, a cost Vice President Andrew Schecter hopes will diminish if scientists can figure out how to reduce waste water



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A Sweeteners Plus fuel station.

with high biological oxygen demand from going in to the sewer.

Another byproduct of tofu production is solid soybean pulp, and SoyBoy produces tons of it every day. Disposing of it is a sustainable problem SoyBoy has solved. It's sold to dairy farmers who use it to supplement the diet of cows.

SoyBoy sells the pulp to farmers for the simple cost of what it takes them to package and deliver it, making it an inexpensive but valuable feed supplement. "Cows love it," Schecter says. "One farmer customer told me the cows can smell it and know it's coming before the truck even gets there."

Schecter has been committed to sustainable practices since he was a student majoring in ecology at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources in the late seventies. "We used the word ecologically friendly back then," he says. "In 1977, no one had the word sustainable in their lexicon."

He started the company soon after graduation with co-founder Norman Holland, selecting a product that is ecologically friendly to manufacture as well as a healthy food product. "I wanted to make something good for people and the planet," Schecter explains. "We were aware that making a pound of tofu uses far less resources than it does to make a pound of meat."

In comparison to meat, the manufacture of tofu

uses far less water, no fertilizer and fewer chemicals to produce. "It's gentler for the environment by a wide margin," he says.

"The consumer is king," says Schecter. "If they demand more from us then we have to do it. They want to know how we run the place and how we treat our people."

Paying employees a livable wage is another aspect of sustainability SoyBoy adheres to. New employees start at \$15 an hour, have health insurance coverage and a 401(k) plan.

More sustainable product packaging is another item on Schecter's wish list. Although bulk product can be wrapped in minimally invasive packaging, smaller retail packaging cannot. "We need packaging that can take pasteurization," he says, one that will decompose for compost.

That day may not be far off. Plastics are being made with new materials today and getting closer to being more biodegradable.

Seneca Foods is another food and beverage company committed to utilizing sustainable measures. They also work with RIT scientists and the institute to improve sustainability measures such as obtaining recycling equipment for landfill waste in Geneva that will allow 50 percent of landfill waste to be diverted to recycling use beginning in 2020.

Todd Etshman is a Rochester-area freelance writer.



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SoyBoy on Paul Road