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## Truitt Bros.: A profile in sustainability

by [Christopher Hall](#). \* • 04 Feb 2009



*Peter and David Truitt launched Truitt Bros. in 1973. Today, the company does \$140 million in sales.*

sustainable by Food Alliance, a pioneer of the movement, nearly three years ago. But the Truitt brothers aren't just at the head of the pack for food handlers; some say they also champion sustainability across the food spectrum.

"I think I would say that we haven't had to reform in any way or do anything substantially different now that we are so-called 'sustainable' than we ever have," Peter Truitt said recently.

"We had really been headed down that path for many years before we even heard of it," said his brother, David Truitt, from the company's headquarters in Salem, Ore. "It just plain makes sense to us; it always has."

While the Truitts, who like to trade the job titles of company president and vice president, may not have had to change much about their food-processing practices, they have had to make adjustments, and they have to continually improve to maintain their certification. There's a book of requirements several inches thick, David Truitt said, on everything from the way the company treats its employees to how involved those employees are in the community. The requirements also minimize the use of pesticides and fungicides and affect energy and water usage, as well as recycling.

Sometimes meeting those requirements can be intimidating to businesses thinking about certification, Peter Truitt said, but that's generally a short-sighted point of view.

"This whole topic scares people because they think it's going to be something that costs and there's little or no return on it, and that's simply not the case," he said. "The bottom-line impact of a systematic approach to this is that it just flat out saved us money, and a lot of money."

For the entire restaurant industry, from farmers to food processors to operators, "sustainable" is one of the new buzzwords — like "green" or "organic" — that businesses are scrambling to apply to themselves and their products. These buzzwords mean customers prefer, and in many cases will pay more for, goods that fit into those categories.

But for Peter and David Truitt and the Truitt Bros. food-processing company, sustainability is not just the current trend in the foodservice industry, it's a family tradition.

Truitt Bros., with \$140 million a year in sales and plants in Oregon and Kentucky, became the first food processor in the United States to be certified

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## All in the family

The Truitt brothers moved to Oregon from rural Louisiana in 1973 to start the company, after growing up around the food-processing and canning business. Their father moved the family to Louisiana from Illinois in 1959 to get into what was then the cutting-edge sweet potato canning business and helped the brothers when they decided to move west and go into business for themselves.

"My father was involved in the sweet potato farming and canning business, and his father before him was involved in vegetable processing in Illinois," said Peter Truitt. "So David and I are the third generation of a family that has been involved in farming and food processing in Illinois, Louisiana and, for the last 35 years, Oregon."

Nothing in their childhood necessarily spurred the brothers to go into the business, or to be sustainable now, Peter Truitt said. "It was just a way of life. It's just kind of there and you ride the wave of it. It's only later in life that you look back and realize what a gift it was."

The brothers arrived in the Willamette Valley area at a time of consolidation in the processing business, and most observers gave their fledgling company little chance of survival, according to Peter Truitt. Looking back now, he's a little surprised they made it, he said.

### Three Tips

Peter Truitt on what operators should do when they decide to go sustainable:

**1. Study the options and get informed.** There's a whole lot of information out there and there are a whole lot of ways to get started, so it isn't difficult to find ways to do it.

**2. Think hard about upstream and downstream.** What are you bringing in? It has its own carbon footprint and trail all the way to the farm or ranch somewhere, be it good or ill ... and downstream, you've got think about your waste and where it's going.

**3. Think about your actual operations.** According to one of the research groups we use, operations in the food business account for 10 percent or less of the total greenhouse-gas output. It's really the upstream and downstream that affects it the most.

"But we found ways to survive and found ways to thrive," he said. "Sustainability is just another chapter in the survival story." Especially for smaller businesses and family-owned companies, such as Truitt Bros., being certified sustainable is just another way to set oneself apart in a crowded market and survive, David Truitt said.

"Just to be very direct about it, I think this is what more and more customers want and appreciate about a company," he said. "People can identify with a company that has an ethical rudder, or a sustainable rudder. It makes business sense as well."

One obvious way the company supports sustainability, Peter Truitt said, is simply by paying its growers more for their produce if the farm is certified as sustainable.

"The honest truth of the matter is that the market is headed that way, at least in this country," he added. "When people like Wal-Mart make the claims that they do, you'd better pay attention."

### From farm to fork

According to Food Alliance and others in the industry, Truitt Bros. does much more than just maintain its certification as sustainable for commercial interest. In addition to being the first certified-sustainable food processor in the country, Truitt Bros. has become a leader on the issue, pushing for further change in the industry as a whole, up and down the supply chain.

"They don't stop at sustainability work within their four walls," said Roberta Anderson, business development manager for Food Alliance. "They've reached out to both their farm suppliers and their customers to construct more sustainable supply chains. This magnifies their true impact on

the planet and people substantially. And, it enables the true value of a sustainable product to be carried all the way from farm to the fork."

While Peter Truitt appreciates the accolades for the company, he also downplays them a bit, saying that they don't promote these topics as much as they respond to them.

He said he doesn't go to work in the morning thinking, "What can I do to promote sustainability?" but about how to keep his business alive and kicking. But by becoming involved in sustainability, he's made new friends and colleagues that keep him engaged and responding to the issues.

That has evolved into advocacy, as organizations like Food Alliance ask him to serve on advisory boards or speak at conferences, he said.

Truitt Bros. also hosts three large annual events itself. One is in Chicago during the annual National Restaurant Association tradeshow to showcase its products and those from other sustainable businesses. The company also hosts a Farm to Fork show and the Sustainability Discovery Tour to illustrate actual practicing models for sustainable farms and businesses to visiting chefs, journalists and business owners.

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Those who know the Truitts believe such efforts reflect that the company truly cares about conserving the planet's natural resources. "From early on it was evident that Peter's passion in sustainability was not just with the processing end but all connections from farm to fork," said Tom Grebb, president of Central Bean Company in Central, Wash., a sustainable business partner of Truitt Bros. "(Their) passion for sustainability also involves educating the links from farm to fork for the understanding of why sustainability is important for our country's agricultural future."

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