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Innovation in Sustainability Large Co.: Truitt Bros. Inc.

To Salem-based food processor Truitt Bros. Inc., sustainability isn't a gimmick.



"It's an imperative that helps our company thrive," said Peter Truitt, the company's founder and CEO. "We are encouraged that our customers are increasingly interested in the impact of their consumption choices on the planet."

The company is also encouraged by the new business relationships and increased sales it's collected because of its commitment to the environment. The improvements came after Truitt took four steps:

- The company maintains direct relationships with growers and encourages them cultivate their products more sustainably.
- It pays more than \$900 in fees that allow its farmer partners to join the Food Alliance, which operates a voluntary certification and eco-labeling program for agricultural sector companies.
- Working with a program for Marion and Polk counties, it produced 5,985 cases of green beans specifically for hunger relief agencies.
- Its strategies have brought Truitt big-time business benefits.
- For instance, during 2007, Truitt saved \$45,000 on its garbage bill simply by reducing its waste. The same year, it collected \$112,000 in revenue by selling its recyclable waste.

Its waste management and energy efficiency programs earned the company an overall \$252,000 in 2007.

With \$150 million in 2009 revenue, Truitt, which employs 628 Oregon employees, is the state's largest food processor.

Truitt Bros. Inc. has supplied food to restaurants, businesses, schools, health care providers and retailers for 35 years. An Oregon cannery packages green beans, pears, cherries, plums, pumpkin and dry-soaked beans gathered from in-state farmers. It also sells soups, entrees, side dishes and desserts.

Truitt operates three facilities in Oregon and one in Kentucky.

The company's sustainability stripes were earned from its status as the country's first business to collect Food Alliance certification.

To earn the Food Alliance's stamp of approval, Truitt meets several strict standards. For instance, they purchase materials from Food Alliance certified farms. Those growers must ensure that they protect water resources, conserve as much energy as possible, provide safe working conditions and maintain a "supportive and respectful" workplace.

"The certification really means something," said Peter Truitt. "It's provided us with a really keen focus and it's really unleashed a lot of initiatives."

Many of those initiatives have become part of Truitt's business model. That is, it follows principles that Truitt insists bring economic success while building social equity and protecting the environment.

To get there, the company regularly measures its impact on the environment, its distribution practices, its energy usage and its fuel consumption.

The company also diligently maintains its equipment, preventing costly and wasteful water or air pressure leaks. With its boilers operating at peak efficiency levels last year, the company used 20 percent less energy.

Truitt Bros. also designed and implemented two distinct heat recovery systems to recapture the heat from boilers and hot pipes. The systems allow the company to "pre-heat" water for another cycle during its pasteurization and cooking processes. The process allowed Truitt to reduce its "therms," or units that measure heat energy, by 17,000 annually.

On a simpler level, Truitt also disposes of its vegetable food waste by giving it to local dairy and hog farmers to use as feed or compost.

It also insists its own suppliers use packaging material that's either fully or partially recyclable.

Peter Truitt said the company began subscribing in earnest to sustainability tenets five years ago. The impetus came when one of the company's partners wanted to learn about responsible ways to perform pest management duties.

"We saluted and got busy to work with the growers to get our 'i's' dotted and our 't's' crossed," he said. "We learned about various standards and thought, once we met it, 'is there a better way to do this?'"

For instance, Truitt found better ways to use more of its wastewater. It began sourcing more of its products from local growers. And the company took smaller steps such as establishing paper recycling programs within its offices and plants.

Such moves helped make Truitt's name. An audit of its green practices helped confirm that the supplier had, indeed, come a long way.

"Not that we didn't have an identity, but we're pretty low-profile folks," said Peter Truitt. "We don't trumpet much of what we do and we've lived most of our life as an anonymous supplier to other people. But after the audit, we thought, 'Wow, we're pretty good.'"

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