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One Small (Carbon) Footprint for Food Manufacturers

Companies can take small steps to minimize their environmental impact.

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Everyone is aware of what is happening to the environment. Fortunately, companies today are looking for ways to minimize their impact, including many food and beverage companies.

The good news is they can make a big difference with really very little trouble.

The goal, basically, is for a company to reduce its carbon footprint. This is, put simply, the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitted during various activities. This CO₂ (also known as greenhouse gas) is believed to contribute to global warming.

The biggest contributors to CO₂ emissions, according to Gabe Petlin, director of regulatory affairs and carbon markets for 3Degrees, San Francisco, CA, are farming and transportation, followed by manufacturing.

Companies wishing to cut their impact first need to take a complete inventory of their emissions, he said, and look at where they can reduce them. Smaller companies can typically use

calculators provided on the websites of companies such as 3Degrees, but larger companies usually need to hire these firms to completely analyze all their processes.

Farming is the first place to look since it's so energy intensive, because of the machines and the fuel needed for irrigation. The worst farming is livestock, largely because of the methane produced by animals' digestion (cows are the worst).

However, anaerobic digesters can be installed to combust the methane into CO₂, which, said Mr. Petlin, reduces noxious gases by 18%. At the same time, the energy produced can be used to power a farm's electricity.

In fact, pointed out Frances Way, head of supply chain for the Carbon Disclosure Project in London, UK, Cadbury found that 60% of its chocolate's carbon footprint comes from the cows themselves. And Walker's, a British chip company owned by PepsiCo, found that 70% of its emissions come from farming and transportation and only 30% from its manufacturing processes.

Cyrus Schwartz, president and CEO of Mountainside Farms, a milk producer, and ZenSoy, whose products include milks and puddings, has always been interested in lowering his companies' carbon footprints.

First, he decided to only source domestic soybeans for his products to reduce transportation costs. He also buys all of his major ingredients in his home state of New York.

He's reduced his transportation impacts by changing his palette configuration so that more cases fit onto each palette, and more palettes fit per truck. He's also reconfigured all routes in New York, where the company has direct store distribution, to reduce fuel.

In the factories, Mr. Schwartz has changed production from a five-day cycle to four because it's more efficient to produce a larger amount on fewer days, he explained. You also lose less product because anything left in the pipes at shutdown is washed down the drain, he explained.

Lundberg Family Farms, Richvale, CA, manufacturer of rice products such as chips, cakes, couscous and pasta, has reduced energy through retrofitting. It replaced much of the lighting in its warehouses, and put it on timers.

The company has dedicated some of its farmland to the installation of two solar panels, which create a positive carbon footprint, as the solar array is the equivalent of not driving more than 28 million miles, or of planting 130 acres of trees.

"Energy is by far the largest contributor to our carbon footprint, with electricity making up 70% of the energy usage at our facility," said Greg Turcotte, environmental coordinator.

"The two arrays convert solar energy into electricity," he added. "With both solar projects in operation, 13% of the company's total

electrical use is accounted for with self-generated solar power.”

The company is just now starting to look at making sure its waste is used well—for animal food and bedding.

Nature's Path, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada, producer of breakfast cereals, is working on decreasing the energy it uses by measuring the CO2 emitted by its production equipment.

“We are looking at how to optimize our operating systems using infrared technology, which allows us to measure the moisture in the product so we can know exactly how long to cook it, preventing us from overcooking,” said Jyoti Stephens, sustainability and stewardship manager.

Nature's Path is also looking at its packaging. Several years ago it reduced its regular box size by 10%, and is now looking at more sustainable solutions such as packaging using fewer materials and/or recycled materials.

The company is also on its way to being zero-waste certified by 2010, which means ensuring waste does not go to the landfill. Instead, the company donates production waste to local farmers and to employees, to be used as compost, said Ms. Stephens.

Conifer Specialties started watching its carbon footprint after a hunch. The Medina, WA-based manufacturer of Canterbury Naturals soups, realized that it would probably be more environmentally friendly to produce and sell dried soups rather than canned product.

Through a study, the company found that dry soup mix was 61% more climate friendly than the same soup in a can, largely because it weighed less and contained more servings per package.

“It just seems to make sense,” said Harry Forsberg, vice president of sales and marketing. “This study helped us understand all the processes.”

Conifer is also looking to educate the consumer, so the soup continues to make as little impact on the environment as possible once it's left the Conifer plant. It plans to provide information on the packaging to tell customers the most sustainable method of cooking, as well as how to dispose of the packaging.

But Conifer is certainly leading by example. It recently changed the bags in which its soups are sold to be 100% recycled, rather than the former 60%. It's also removed labels from the bags and prints all information directly onto the bag.

This latter move reduced greenhouse gas emissions both during the manufacturing process, and by reducing the overall weight of the packaging, thereby reducing transport and disposal emissions.

Mary's Gone Crackers, Gridley, CA, makers of gluten-free, organic crackers, is also taking several steps to reduce its carbon footprint.

First, the company is looking at its fuel emissions. To that end, a highly efficient steam generator powers its production facility, meaning carbon emissions are relatively low. It's also looking to install a solar panel in the next two to three years.

It packages all products in recyclable polypropylene film and 100% recycled carton, which is also printed with soy-based inks. Much less carbon is used to produce soy-based inks than commonly used petroleum-based inks.

“We get a lot of pressure from the industry to use white cardboard because it's prettier and pops more on the shelf,” said Mary Waldner, executive vice president of brand development, who refuses to be swayed. In fact, as soon as she can replace the polypropylene bag that lines the packaging boxes, with a biodegradable product, she will.

And it's not just the packaging that's recycled. All of Mary's Gone Crackers manufacturing wastewater is recycled, then used for agricultural composting. And not even the small amounts of leftover food are wasted, but instead are fed to local farm animals.

And in one of the simplest moves, Mary's Gone Crackers sources food as close to home as possible, a move many food and beverage manufacturers could easily replicate.

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