

Engaging employees in sustainability

ConAgra Foods, one of the largest packaged foods companies in North America, has saved millions of dollars while dramatically cutting its energy consumption over the years. It accomplished this by not relying on major process changes or heavy investments hailing from top executives. Instead, it turned to its employees. The accomplishments stemmed from an awards programme, launched in 1992, developed to encourage employees to proactively look for ways to eliminate waste and reduce water and energy consumption. The winners of this year's edition of ConAgra Foods' Sustainable Development Awards winners were recently announced. The company says that collectively, the 82 entries received have eliminated waste by 58,700 tons, optimised and improved packaging, while using 15 million pounds less material, conserved more than 97 million gallons of water, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions by more than 11,500 metric tons. Marcella Thompson, Director of Sustainable Development at ConAgra Foods, says these combined efforts delivered more than \$70 million in savings for the company.

ConAgra Foods was born out of Nebraska Consolidated Mills in 1971. Through the years, ConAgra Foods has grown from many brands with many stories into one company with one

goal-making the food you love. More than 40 years later, ConAgra Foods is one of North America's largest packaged food companies with branded and private branded food

found in 99 percent of America's households, as well as a strong commercial foods business serving restaurants and foodservice operations globally. The company's many recognised brands include Banquet®, Chef Boyardee®, Egg Beaters®, Healthy Choice®, Hebrew National®, Hunt's®, Marie Callender's®, Orville Redenbacher's®, PAM®, Peter Pan®, Reddi-wip®, Slim Jim®, and Snack Pack®. Additionally, ConAgra Foods supplies frozen potato and sweet potato products as well as other vegetable, spice, bakery and grain products to commercial and foodservice customers.

"Because our food is part of the lives of millions of consumers each day,





ConAgra Foods has a critical responsibility to create positive environmental change. We can do that by making our food in the most sustainable and efficient ways possible,” says Ms. Thompson, who joined ConAgra Foods in 2008, and who is responsible for developing the company’s sustainability efforts. She explains that the Sustainable Development Awards program fits in with a company-wide sustainability vision. In 2010, its first formal set of sustainability goals was published, notably showing a focus on diverting at least 75 percent of waste from landfills to better purposes, such as donations, animal feed, energy recovery or composting (for organic materials), and recycling (or energy recovery for packaging). In an effort to reduce greenhouse gases by eliminating food waste at landfills, the company put systems in place in 2012 to track landfill and material diversion from its facilities, identifying 15 waste categories in line with the EPA’s waste reduction model (WARM). The results included improved understanding of the greenhouse gas emissions from the company’s management of waste materials, as well as the ability to quantify benefits from diverting them

from landfills to find “higher-value homes” for them. ConAgra estimates that in 2013 it diverted 93 percent of waste materials from landfills, avoiding more than 165,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas Scope 3 emissions.

ConAgra Foods’ sustainability initiatives reach across its supply chain. Interesting in that regard is that the company has formed direct relationships with farmers, and has notably helped its potato growers implement more water-efficient irrigation practices, which also helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the farm by cutting energy use from pumping water. Many ConAgra Foods growers have implemented water-conservation best practices by using soil moisture probes to ensure irrigation only where needed, identifying dry spots with aerial infrared technology and employing low-flow, drop-down sprinkler nozzles to apply precisely the right amount of water. ConAgra Foods has thousands of other direct suppliers, sourcing everything from grains and nuts to vegetables and proteins. Plus, the company’s supply chain is many layers deep, reaching all the way to the farmer growing crops or raising animals that

eventually reach the consumer as ConAgra products. And then there also are ethical issues to contend with; palm oil being a good example. To ensure that its palm oil purchases don’t add to deforestation of rainforests, further exacerbating climate change, ConAgra Foods has pledged to source all of its palm oil from responsible and sustainable sources by December 2015.

Meanwhile the company also relies on its staff to come up with ideas around sustainability. The Sustainable Development Awards program is designed specifically to encourage and reward employees to find ways to eliminate waste, save water and reduce energy through process innovation and engagement. “Some of our best ideas for sustainability come from the people who make our food every day,” says Ms. Thompson. “The awards program is a recognition and celebration of their achievements. Also, if one plant comes up with an idea, the program brings it to the fore, and we can quickly transfer it to other plants and multiply benefits.” She adds that the awards programme has evolved over the years. “The focus may have changed but overall it has helped us to recognise that in addition to supporting us in

being a responsible corporation, sustainability initiatives also deliver business results. Year over year we prove that the things we do benefit the planet as well as our bottom line.”

Entries in the 2015 awards program delivered record savings; more than \$70 million, according to a ConAgra Foods statement. Winners include ConAgra Foods’ Lamb Weston Facility in Hermiston, Oregon, who improved freezing capability by upgrading their freeze tunnels to allow for better direct air flow, resulting in the elimination of a 500-horsepower compressor, reducing electricity use by 4.3 percent. ConAgra Foods’ Grocery Facility in Helm, California, was faced with one of the most severe droughts on record in the region, and focused their attention on reducing fresh water use during tomato fresh pack. By maximizing the use of water reclaimed from tomatoes, the facility reduced fresh water use by over 40 percent, conserving 22 million gallons. ConAgra Foods’ Lamb Weston

Meijer Potato Facility in Bergen op Zoom, the Netherlands, updated their preheat process for potatoes in preparation for cutting, enabling a reduction in water use by 18.5 million gallons, and increasing frozen recovery by 1 percent, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by over 900 metric tons. The Award of Excellence went ConAgra Foods’ Snack Facility in Waterloo, Iowa, who previously land-filled packaged pudding produced during flavour changeovers, sending high-quality pudding – albeit uniquely flavoured – to waste. The facility managed to eliminate over 1,000 tons of packaged food waste by successfully identifying a market for a blended pudding SKU. These winning teams are each awarded a \$5,000 grant from the ConAgra Foods Foundation to apply toward a sustainability-focused community service project in their area.

Ms. Thompson is particularly proud of the fact that the awards program entries show engagement across all

levels of employees at multiple locations. “Over the years, the program has clearly gained momentum, and has helped build trust in our company. We evaluate the program each year, but right now it’s very much aligned with our 2020 sustainability vision.”



ConAgra Foods, Inc.

1 Conagra Dr

Omaha, NE 68102

USA

Website: www.conagrafoods.com

