

Sustainable practices going strong in produce

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Chelsea Mies

More companies in the fresh produce industry are placing higher emphasis on sustainability and being green. Many companies are focusing on eco-friendly practices.

"We are growers of fresh market produce, and our bounty comes from the earth," said Frank Ratto, vice president of marketing for Ratto Bros., Modesto, Calif.

Ratto said his grandfather used to say that if the ground was treated well, it would repay with good fortune.

San Juan Bautista, Calif.-based Earthbound Farm wants to do what is best for the environment, said Samantha Cabaluna, vice president of marketing and communications.

Cabaluna said that for Earthbound, sustainability is about leaving the world a better place than it was when the company started.

Sustainability is also important because it helps companies save money.

"The whole idea of sustainability is about what makes sense to both the consumer and the producer," said Tony Freytag, Cashmere, Wash.-based Crunch Pak LLC's vice president of sales and marketing.

Freytag said sustainability practices must make sense financially. If customers aren't yet ready to pay the premium prices, then the practice isn't ready to be implemented.

Pick your focus

Sustainability goals vary from company to company. Some focus on creating packaging that uses less plastic or work to cut down on energy use., while others focus on different aspects.

Ratto said his company will save money on energy costs and prevent damage to the environment at the same time by using solar power.

Companies such as Earthbound Farm and Stemit Growers LLC, Wenatchee, Wash., are recycling plastic and paper to keep it out of landfills.



Columbia Marketing International

Warren Morgan, president of Double Diamond Fruit Co., one of CMI's owners, shows off compost made and used by the company to fertilize orchards.

Earthbound uses 100% post-consumer recycled plastic to make its clamshells and other rigid plastic containers.

Brianna Shales, communications manager for Stemit, said that the company's new office building has a recycling chute for paper and newspaper. The paper is then reused at the company.

"All the recycled newsprint and paper at the administrative offices throughout the company are used for apple packing trays," Shales said.

About 50% of Stemit's fiber apple trays come from its recycled materials.

Steve Lutz, vice president of marketing for Wenatchee, Wash.-based Columbia Marketing International, said sustainability is a process. The company is owned by four grower-packers: Columbia Fruit, McDougall & Sons, Double Diamond Acres and Highland Fruit Growers Inc.

Lutz said that in the company's orchards, growers are using electrostatic sprayers to get better distribution and to use less water.

In the warehouses, packers are using more automatic doors to let less cold air escape from their refrigeration systems and are installing motion sensors to reduce the amount of time lights are on in the building.

Freytag said Crunch Pak is constantly looking for ways to save money and have a positive effect on the environment. He said the company keeps looking for better ways to package products, whether it is using less plastic or reducing what has to

be thrown away from the packaging.

At Monterey, Calif.-based Dole Fresh Vegetables and Westlake Village, Calif.-based Dole Fresh Fruit Co, soil conservation and management is one way the company is being more sustainable. Bil Goldfield, communications director, said the company does this by rotating crops and creating soil amendment programs.

Gina Nucci, director of healthy cullin innovation for Salinas, Calif.-based Mann Packing Co., said the company collects produce scraps off the warehouse floors and sells them to dairy farmers to feed to cattle.

She said it is for only a small fee, but it allows the company to make money while benefiting others and keeping more waste out of the trash.

Ray Gilmer, vice president of issues management and communications for the United Fresh Produce Association in Washington, D.C., said sustainability is still a difficult issue because the definition changes depending on who you speak to.

"It is a work in progress for the industry," Gilmer said. "It is moving in the direction of everyone knowing about sustainability."



Stemit Growers Inc.

About 50% of Stemit Growers' fiber apple trays are made from the company's recycled materials, says communications manager Brianna Shales.