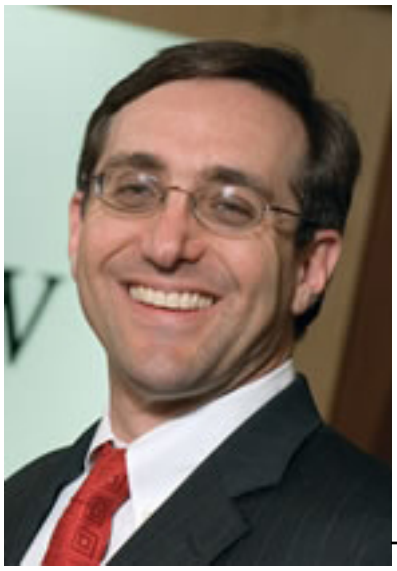
Sustainability from Farm to Fork

RICHARD KOPELMAN, Partner at Habif, Arogeti & Wynne LLP

By RICHARD KOPELMAN, Partner at Habif, Arogeti & Wynne LLP



The U.S. Department of Commerce's Sustainable Manufacturing Initiative states, "Evidence has shown that firms incorporating both environmentally and economically sustainable manufacturing processes can gain competitive advantages in that they reap inherent cost savings (i.e. improving their energy efficiency, minimizing raw materials usage, etc.)."

Likewise, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 (ARRA) authorizes the Department of Treasury to award $2.3 billion in tax credits for qualified investments in advanced energy projects, to support new, expanded or re-equipped domestic manufacturing facilities.

What does that tell food manufacturers? Here's one thing we know: Cutting costs and helping the environment are closely linked. There is a growing interest among food manufacturers and their clients in designing and redesigning buildings that conserve energy, enhance natural light, use recycled and sustainable materials and avoid using toxic materials. There is a recognition that to survive in the post-recession global economy, they need to adopt smart, safe and sustainable manufacturing technologies in order to increase productivity, meet business objectives and improve their ability to compete through the use of a more energy-efficient and safer facility.

In fact, the 2010 Georgia Manufacturing Survey, sponsored by Habif, Arogeti & Wynne, LLP, examined the percentage of food manufacturers that currently incorporate sustainable manufacturing goals within their businesses. Here's what it found: Nearly 60 percent of food manufacturers are currently using sustainability in the area of elimination of waste and nearly 50 percent are active in recovering or reusing products. However, less than 6 percent operate with renewable energy sources. That said, using renewable energy sources and having a high level of

concern about managing energy costs is four times more common among large manufacturers with 250 or more employees than with their smaller counterparts.

The same survey also asked respondents to indicate whether their facility has produced an estimate of their carbon footprint (i.e., carbon dioxide equivalent emissions) or emissions inventory in the last three years. Sixty percent of respondents reported having produced a carbon footprint estimate for their facility. Carbon footprints or emissions inventories were most common among large facilities.

Historically Speaking

From 1950 to 1970, the availability of inexpensive energy combined with the use of powerful mechanical heating and cooling systems led to the construction of large, energy-inefficient buildings. In the 1970s, increased interest in environmental impacts and energy efficiency led to a resurgence of interest in the traditional design with climate and energy efficiency in mind. Today’s continued concern over energy and the environment has led to significant improvements in building performance based on the use of more efficient building envelopes and mechanical systems.

As we begin the twenty-first century, renewable-energy technologies offer a tantalizing promise: clean, abundant energy gathered from continuously self-renewing resources.

Renewable energy encompasses a broad spectrum of technologies based on self-renewing energy sources, such as sunlight, wind, water, the earth's internal heat and biomass. These resources can be used to produce electricity and heat for commercial buildings and fuel industrial processes and transportation. Unlike fossil fuels, renewable energy sources replenish themselves.

While water and energy conservation takes effort on the part of business owners and operators, sustainability is about the products that you use within your manufacturing processes. It is intended to measure the recyclability of the products and materials within your buildings and production processes and ensure that they are not contributing to landfills.

How to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint

Saving energy can entail evaluating your lighting, energy management and equipment used both inside and outside your facility, and evaluating whether you can generate energy through wind or sun.

For the food manufacturing industry, water conservation means water that is reclaimed and recycled back through other uses. This includes incorporating water reclamation systems, using cisterns to hold rainwater for landscaping and installing automatic bathroom faucets.

While renewable energy is still generally more expensive than energy from

conventional fossil fuel sources, the costs of renewable energy would be less than fossil fuels if the true, hidden costs of fossil fuels — environmental, health and energy-security costs — were considered.

While strong environmental initiatives are beginning to gain the upper hand within the food manufacturing industry, customers also are demanding that the companies become more sustainable and renewable. Sustainability through improved environmental performance and energy conservation and efficiency, as well as the integration of renewable energy initiatives, is not just socially responsible; it's fiscally essential for food manufacturers and consumers alike. Many would argue that there is nothing more sustainable than the food industry—from farm to fork; it is a cycle that cannot end.

For more information, please contact Kopelman at richard.kopelman@hawcpa.com *[1].*

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[1] mailto:richard.kopelman@hawcpa.com