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Green Grow the Breweries

By Michael Venters

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In the last issue of Ale Street News, the altruistic, charitable contributions of breweries were highlighted. It probably came as no surprise that craft brewers are socially conscious. It is probably no more of a surprise to learn that they tend to be environmentally responsible as well. Yet, the depth of this need to brew great and still protect the environment is still remarkable.

The brewing industry is automatically integrated with recycling programs, given the predominant bottling for packaging beer. For the environmentally savvy breweries, all packaging is subject to recycling. They strive to minimize waste. Along these lines, a common practice within the industry is the recycling of organic materials, such as grain for livestock feed. For organic brewers, this recycling actually perpetuates the organic movement by providing certified organic feed.

For some breweries recycling their glass is not economically feasible. In Helena, MT, there is no recycling program for glass, so the Blackfoot River Brewing Co. does not bottle. Serving a local market, they are limited to distribution to kegs and growlers. Apparently, so are their customers as they fill 500 growlers a month on average.

The Uinta Brewing Co. in Salt Lake City, UT faced a similar problem. Yet, they do bottle. And they take empty bottles, crush them and sell them to a concrete floor maker, who uses the glass for decorative floors. The process is a lot of work, but worth it to owner, Will Hamill. Now, Uinta is the only post-consumer glass recycler in Utah.

Recycling at some facilities goes far beyond the understanding of laymen. Capturing wastewater from the brewery process is becoming commonplace, particularly for those companies with large pieces of property. The Anderson Valley Brewing Co. in northern California uses its wastewater for irrigating its 30 acres. New Belgium Brewing Co. uses its "bio-digester" to process its wastewater. In addition to water that is used for evaporative cooling, cleaning and landscaping, they are able to recycle methane as a fuel. The nutrient rich sludge, which is sold for composting.

While news programs comment on oil prices and availability on a daily basis, more and more breweries are embracing alternative sources of power. Wind power is probably the most prolific. Two Fort Collins breweries, Odell and New Belgium take advantage of that city's wind power program. The Brooklyn Brewery in New York was the first 100 percent wind-powered building in that city.

The Uinta Brewing Co. also embraced wind power when it built its new facility in 2001. The commitment to wind power was even more impressive given that it created as much as a 40 percent increase in energy costs. That figure has since dropped, but still amounts to a 16 percent surcharge today. Both Uinta and New Belgium were listed as a "Large Purchasers" of wind power by the Department of Energy's Green I Network.

Anderson Valley installed the largest photovoltaic system in California, north of the Golden Gate. For Allen being environmentally proactive "just makes sense". The solar installation at his brewery provides 10 percent of their electricity needs and will pay for itself within five years.

Bio-diesel is also gaining traction within the brewing industry. The Wolaver Brewing Co. migrated from diesel fuel for its heating. For Morgan Wolaver and his family, environmentally sound business practices are a personal mission. He views the 7 percent premium he pays for the alternative fuel as a small price to pay for the growth of the renewable fuel and lower air emissions.

Bio-diesel as an automobile fuel, however, does not carry the same premium. For Garrett Marrero of Maui Brewing Co., the use of spent vegetable oil, a filtration system and traditional Petro diesel costs roughly 75 cents/gallon to fill his two "company cars". Several other breweries have taken advantage of commercial supplies of bio-diesel products.

An emerging recycling trend is the recapturing of CO2 emissions. By harnessing the natural expansion of CO2 during brewing, a brewery can supply their own CO2 needs, while lowering emissions. Unfortunately, the existing technology is only feasible for larger volume breweries. However, smaller breweries are investigating alternatives and/or waiting for a smaller scale system.

Beyond the usual suspects, sits New Belgium. They may not be in a class unto themselves, but they certainly aren't crowded. In addition to the wind power and wastewater treatment already mentioned, the brewery appears to be employing any possible means to achieve "environmental stewardship"...minimize resource consumption, maximizing energy efficiency and recycling.

The brewery uses sun tube lights that funnel sunlight through the roof, providing all the brightness of sunlight but none of the heat. Skylights are also used to provide daytime lighting throughout the brewery. Motion sensors

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minimize the amount of time traditional lighting is used.

To further minimize heating costs, New Belgium utilizes steam from the brew kettle to heat city water then stored in the hot liquor tank for the next batch. Similarly, the water used to cool the wort, which is left in the process, is also added to the liquor tank. The brewery has even capitalized on the comprehensive heating of glycol to de-ice its loading dock during the winter months — the same winter months that provide cold Colorado air to cool the storage facilities, a trick that Wolavers also employs in Vermont.

Whether the motivation is cost avoidance or good stewardship, brewers across the country are finding innovative ways to protect the environment and insure the longevity of our natural resources. Regular consumers will say that the effort is completely self-serving. As we partake in their brewing prowess and enjoy other fruits of their labor, it's evident that, for them, "self" is a much bigger word.

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