

Southern Plains Area's Award-Winning Program:

Regional Biobased Preferential Purchasing Initiative Shows Benefits of Documented Elements to a Successful Program

Successful preferential purchasing programs usually have a number of common elements that make them work, including: A “champion” or “driver” who takes over the program as his/her “mission”; active support of top management; a recognition program; multi-level involvement; training; product sampling; a tracking/measuring system and participation of suppliers and contractors. An independent firm documented the value of these elements during a research project conducted for the United Soybean Board. The following case history illustrates these points.

The Driver

In late 2003, Michael C. Downing, Area Procurement and Realty Officer at the Southern Plains Area (SPA) headquarters in College Station, Texas, attended a U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) agency-wide workshop on the benefits of biobased products. Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) representatives shared their extensive experience with a wide range of biobased products. At that time, BARC had already won two consecutive White House Closing the Circle Awards for its “greening programs”, including the use of biobased products. Later BARC would win a third award.

Management Support

Downing was impressed by BARC’s achievements. He also knew that the 2002 Farm Bill would require all federal agencies to initiate a preferential buying program for biobased products so Downing went back to Texas to “sell” the program to SPA Director, Dr. C. A. Onstad. “It was an easy sale,” says Downing. In January 2004, Dr. Onstad issued



Holding the White House Closing the Circle Award honorable mention recognition are Southern Plains Area Director Charles Onstad, Procurement and Realty Officer Michael Downing and Deputy Area Director June Williams.

a memo to all 19 locations within the SPA announcing the program and strongly urging their participation.

Dr. Onstad indicated that there were selected opportunities for the purchase of biobased products and listed 10 examples. He also emphasized, “We will benefit now and from years to come by switching over to environmentally friendly products. This is something we need to do and continue to work on for years to come. I am really excited about these products because they promote agriculture and the use of agricultural products while improving our environment and helping our farmers.”

Sampling and Testing

With Downing as the champion and driver and with Dr. Onstad’s full support, the program swung into action. Various samples of biobased products were provide to SPA facilities, which are located in Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas.

Training / Recognition / Tracking & Measurement

“We also provide practical training in the form of films, product information, and appropriate power point presentations,” says Downing. “In addition we set up a ‘Greening Awards’ program that included the use of biobased products as well as recycling and other aspects of environmental purchasing programs,” he explains. “We didn’t wait, but made awards in our first year. The award entries also serve as our ‘tracking and measurement system’.”

Multi-Level/Location Involvement

Each location named a biobased purchasing coordinator whose responsibility was to find and encourage the purchase and use of biobased products at their site. It was also an agenda item at all monthly staff teleconference meetings. “I’m not at all bashful of reminding everyone about the program every month,” says Downing.



Southern Plains Area staffs have switched to cleaner burning biodiesel in diesel vehicles as well as power stationary engines used to generate electricity as part of the research on wind/hybrid power.

Contractor Participation

When Dr. Onstad distributed the initial memo to SPA sites in January 2004, he also wrote to SPA contractors and suppliers about the program. "Our contractors have been supportive, but we need to encourage even greater use of biobased products," explains Downing.

Successful? You bet. As a result of the program, all of the locations within the Southern Plains Area are now purchasing and using biobased products on a regular and recurring basis. For example, Bushland, Texas, is using biodiesel fuel to power stationary engines used to generate electricity as part of the research on wind/hybrid power. This critical research project uses nearly 3,000 gallons of biodiesel per year.

Kerrville, Texas utilizes biobased hand cleaners as well as all-purpose cleaners and Weslaco, Texas is purchasing hand sanitizers, floor cleaners/degreasers and aircraft metal cleaners that are all made from biobased materials. Meanwhile at College Station, the staff is negotiating with the janitorial services to use biobased products exclusively.

In El Reno, Oklahoma, winner of the 2005 SPA Greening Award, the staff arranged for a Department of Defense contractor to purchase biodiesel fuel, which they have been using. Biobased ice melt and parts-washer fluid are used along with: glass cleaner, bathroom cleaner, hand cleaner, floor and tile cleaner, dust-down, and odor neutralizer. As part of the fleet maintenance, the El Reno staff uses biobased hydraulic tractor fluid, penetrating lubricant, bar-and-chain oil, high-temperature grease, and two-cycle engine oil.



Biobased cleaning supplies are now in use at Southern Plains, including glass cleaner, bathroom cleaner, hand cleaner, floor and tile cleaner, dust-down, and odor neutralizer.



Purchasing Agent Carol Nichols located vendors to obtain biobased products and worked with employees to make sure they liked them.



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FACT FILE

America's farms are just beginning to tap their potential as a source for natural, renewable biobased products that offer benefits to worker health, the environment, America's economy and energy security. To learn more about the many biobased products made from soybeans such as those used at Southern Plains Area facilities go to the Soy Products catalog at www.soybiobased.org/products.

Because of the potential for biobased products to create new markets for soybeans, U.S. soybean farmers have invested more than \$50 million to research, test and promote biobased products. Much of this work was done through the United Soybean Board (USB), which is composed of 64 U.S. soybean farmers appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to invest soybean checkoff funds.

El Reno Purchasing Agent Carol Nichols has some advice for first times users, "You have to figure out what works best for you and your customers. We tested products to make sure they worked and our employees liked them, before we switched over completely to biobased. We were dedicated to finding biobased products so in a few cases we just tried other products until we found one that fit our needs."

As far as cost is concerned, both Nichols and Downing agree that in some cases the cost is somewhat higher than non-biobased products, but they point out that most new products are more expensive in the beginning and as their use spreads, manufacturers are able to reduce costs.

"Availability? We've had no trouble," says Nichols.

Another measure of their success: SPA won an "Honorable Mention" in the 2005 White House Closing the Circle Award. In closing Dr. Onstad says: "I am truly proud of our research scientists and their support staff. Each and every day they work hard to make our lives and environment a much better place to live. Future generations will benefit from all their efforts including their support of the Federal Biobased Procurement Program."

For more information, contact Michael Downing at (979) 260-9446 or mdowning@spa.ars.usda.gov

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16640 Chesterfield Grove Rd., Suite 130 • Chesterfield, MO 63005-1429

1-800-989-USB1 • (1-800-989-8721) • FAX: 636-530-1560

E-mail: merker@smithbucklin.com

USB Publication Code: 5354-072005-2000



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