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G oing to the game creates tons of trash. The Seattle Mariners are pushing to get Safeco Field to a zero waste status

It's not news that MLB teams place an emphasis on recycling. That's been the case for years, particularly since 2005, when MLB became the first professional sports league to partner with the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Yet even with the adoption of recycling and other 'green' practices, teams recognize there are improvements they can make and goals they can achieve. The Seattle Mariners are helping lead the way in that department by recycling and composting the bulk of the concession items they serve customers, a breakthrough in their recycling program.

Rather than send single-use products such as straws, cups and hot dog trays to the landfill, the Mariners now recycle and compost them. Other items which follow that process include pizza boxes, lids, cutlery, plates, drink trays and even waste bags provided to those in Safeco Field's suites.

The Mariners became aware of the idea before the 2010 season via the San Francisco Giants, who increased their recycling rate at AT&T Park by 57 percent from 2008 to 2009. The manner in which the Giants accelerated their recycling program's effectiveness, attaining a 75 percent rate in '09, caught the attention of the Mariners.

While at an annual meeting with MLB operations executives prior to the '10 campaign, the Mariners compared notes with the Giants to find out how that 57 percent figure had occurred. The Mariners discovered what was holding back their recycling rate, which stood at 38 percent at Safeco Field following the '09 season.

"We realized that if we started to buy compostable service ware, we could eliminate the landfill component from the front of the house," said Scott Jenkins, the Mariners' Vice President of Ballpark Operations.

The Mariners began working with Cedar Grove Composting, a local waste management business, and through there opened a supply line to buy compostable products. The number of recyclable/compostable food service products approved by Cedar Grove has grown from 70 to over 600 in just a couple years, said Susan Thoman, Director of Public Affairs for Cedar Grove.

"They're all the major manufacturers throughout the U.S. and internationally," Thoman said of the companies which make the products that changed the Mariners' recycling program. "They actually come to Cedar Grove to get their products tested for whether they can be composted in a commercial system."

What the new service ware products meant to the Mariners was an increase from that 38 percent rate in '09 to 70 percent for 2010. That figure improved to 79 percent for 2011. The uptick in recycling and composting allowed the Mariners to save $72,000 in landfill costs in '10, according to Jenkins. The team will save $95,000 in landfill costs this year. The Mariners project the landfill weight diverted this year to be 974 tons, which is slightly under 2 million pounds. A 90 percent recycling rate is Jenkins' next goal, which is a number that might not have seemed achievable in 2005.

The Mariners produced a 12 percent recycling rate that year. It rose to 18 percent in '06, 25 percent in '07 and 31 percent in '08, a year in which Jenkins said they collected and recycled 4,000 tons of material at Safeco Field. That number shot up to 12,000 tons in 2010. By that point, the club had been charting its recycling program on spreadsheets or, as Jenkins called it, keeping score.

"It gave us the ability to benchmark our performance...to see who was performing well and to learn from those people," Jenkins said.

That has been helped, in part, by MLB's Green Tracks program. Through the partnership with the NRDC, Green Tracks provides a centralized data collection system for teams. They can input their recycling details, energy and water consumption, paper purchasing numbers and other critical metrics to understand what's being consumed. From there, teams can figure out how to make their conservation efforts more efficient.

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Three-hundred green-colored compost containers, 200 bottle-shaped recycling bins and 17 trash cans are dispersed throughout Safeco Park for fans to file their waste. At the trash/recycle/compost stations, in-depth signage and illustrations depicting what product should go in which bin ease the decision-making process for fans. Of course, fans at Safeco are likely more familiar than most fans in other cities about how to delineate items.

According to the City of Seattle's 2010 recycling rate report, Seattle recycled 53.7 percent of its municipal solid waste (MSW) in 2010, a 2.6 percentage increase versus 2009. The national rate in '09 was 33.8 percent, according to a report by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (MSW is generally defined as food scraps, yard trimmings, containers and packaging, durable goods and nondurable goods which are managed onsite by residents, set out for collection and hauled to local reuse, recycling and compost centers.)

That makes Seattle an ideal city for a sports team to improve the compostable possibilities of its supply chain. But practically any city with a major sports team can play a valuable role.

"I think sports venues are a natural place to focus efforts because it's all in one place," said Susan Freinkel, author of Plastic: A Toxic Love Story. "You're not having to collect from 30,000 different homes. You have this one concentrated location and you can control what comes in and out of it."

Thoman cautioned that what Jenkins and the Mariners did in purchasing compostable concession items isn't always so easily accomplished. She said a local composting program must exist, in the first place. A composter willing to take the items produced at a venue and a vendor willing to comply with the process are other issues that can crop up.

She called it a "huge collaboration effort" for the manufacturers approved by Cedar Grove to have agreed with each other to join on the composting effort. Among the features of their agreement is a color-coded packaging to show which items are compostable.

"You have to have summits, you have to talk, you have to figure out what the obstacles are and you have to all go for a common agenda," Thoman said of the process by which manufacturers come to an agreement. In Seattle's case, the cost benefit can be worth it.

Thoman stated that, in the Seattle area, landfill rates are 30 percent higher than composting. Yet recycling and composting comprise only some of the ways in which the Mariners have reduced their bottom line through conservation.

From 2007-10, the club drove down electric, natural gas, water and sewer costs by $1.21 million. Improvements made in 2008 – weather stripping on doors, faucet aerators, automated lights and thermostats – helped save $250,000 annually. But an energy audit and a $1 million investment into the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system spiked the annual savings to $500,000.

The replacement of 800-watt incandescent lights with 80-watt LEDs in 60 suites slashed energy

consumption. "The beautiful thing with LEDs is they burn for about 40,000 hours whereas an incandescent goes for about 2,000 hours," Jenkins said.

Despite the higher price of brand-new LED bulbs, Jenkins said there will be a three-to-four year payback period on them. Lower wattage lights in suites also results in cooler room temperatures, which means lower AC rates. The installation of low-flow urinals helped lower their water consumption by 25.9 percent from '07 to '10.

A three-game promotion in April of Safeco Field soil made from recycled goods became a hit with fans. Jenkins said he was skeptical during the initial promotion night that the 5,000 nine-quart bags of soil the Mariners produced would be welcomed by fans. On the contrary, people scooped up the bags so quickly that by the third promotion – all on Monday nights – they were gone within minutes.

The conservation efforts will continue this off-season as the Mariners replace their infield turf. Roughly 80-120 tons of grass and sand will be removed in order for 20,000 square feet of Kentucky bluegrass to be installed. The grass and sand hauled off will be composted and recycled by Cedar Grove.

What the Mariners do in their conservation efforts falls within the standards and goals set by the Green Sports Alliance. A non-profit organization based in Portland, Ore., the alliance was founded in March 2011 by six teams across a range of sports – the Mariners, the NBA's Portland Trailblazers, the NFL's Seattle Seahawks, the NHL's Vancouver Canucks, the WNBA's Seattle Storm and MLS' Seattle Sounders FC.

The goals, as explained by Jenkins, is to serve membership, measure environmental performance and make improvements. The alliance wants bottom-line results that make business and environmental sense. That's performed by conservation, reducing water and energy use, find better ways to dispose of items and, ultimately, decreasing the costs that go into operating a sports venue.

"We're looking to drive change within our industry to reduce environmental impact," said Jenkins, who is one of 11 people who sit on the organization's Board of Directors.

Membership has grown quickly. Fifty teams and over 100 sports venues have joined the alliance. Partnerships with the NRDC and EPA help educate teams that are unfamiliar with the alliance's goals.

Jenkins said teams should understand that sponsorship opportunities can be developed around green initiatives. The introduction of 'green' practices also helps potentially set up a more integrated relationship with fans. There's the opportunity for brand exposure, as well. Jenkins set the the Safeco Field soil promotion as an example.

By the third promotional night, the program had gained enough attention that SportsCenter broadcasted a snarky bit on it. Yet Jenkins wasn't put off by the fact that SportsCenter had made fun of the promotion. Instead, that's how he knew the program had gained traction. "When they start talking about the recycling project, I consider it a success."

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