

# Produce industry leaders discuss sustainability issues, successes

By Ashley Bentley  
Staff Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. — "Sustainability" is often complicated to define and even more complicated to achieve, panelists at a Fresh Summit 2008 workshop agreed.

Kathy Means, vice president of government relations and public affairs, moderated the panel of produce buyers and suppliers who spoke about their successes and roadblocks in sustainable practices.

Sustainability is making its way into business functions. Means said, but most companies have no clue what the return on investment is, or even what the break-even point is.



## Sustainability at Stenitt

Stenitt started focusing on environmentally sustainable practices in 1989, when founder Tom Mathison added the ladybug logo to the company's seal. West Mathison, president, is very much like his grandfather and wants to continue on, said Roger Peppert, marketing director for Stenitt Growers Inc., Wenatchee, Wash.

One of the more interesting ways Stenitt tries to be more friendly to the environment is by using trained falcons to scare away birds from the orchards. The falcons are released into the air and chase a lure at the end of a stick being waved by their trainers, prompting them to fly in circles like they're hunting. "We don't kill anything," Peppert said. "We basically ask them politely to leave."

Peppert said the technique is more effective than using noise cannons or mylar to keep the birds away. The company recycles almost everything and uses its own plant waste as compost and its trash to make apple trays.

In order to make sustainability economical, Peppert said practices must be measurable.

"Metrics are very important," he said. "If you can't measure it, you can't do it."

## Shrinking footprints

Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral operations for Wegmans Food Markets Inc., Rochester, N.Y., said Wegmans has learned how to save millions of dollars and energy by replacing store lighting with more energy-efficient bulbs. At the company's Rochester, N.Y., distribution center, 4,000 lighting fixtures were changed over to high efficiency fluorescent bulbs, saving the company more than 1 million dollars, he said. Similar lighting initiatives are being phased-in at the company's retail stores. Wegmans has sold more than 1.5 million reusable shopping bags in 2008, Corsi said.

Craig Watson, vice president of quality assurance and agricultural sustainability for Sysco Corp., Houston, said Sysco is jumping on the local foods trend. "I think most of us understand the trend toward local, and we see the need to develop relationships with small family farms," he said.

Sysco has implemented the Wallace Center Project, in which it procures produce from small family farms. The project is in test markets in Kansas City, Kan., and Grand Rapids, Mich. "People feel more connected to the food they con-

sume," Watson said.

Watson said.



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**Kathy Means (from left), vice president of government relations and public affairs for the Produce Marketing Association, speaks with Samy Clifton, senior sales specialist, Pam Mitchell, general manager, and Jeff Diot, president and chief executive officer, all of SureHarvest, Soquel, Calif., a sustainability consulting and information systems company. Means moderated the Oct. 26 workshop "Saving Dollars and Making Sense of Sustainability" during Fresh Summit 2008.**

## Good stewards of the land

Marty Ordman, marketing director for Dole Food Co. Inc., Westlake Village, Calif., said that because Dole has the largest refrigerated fleet of ships in the world, the company is replacing smaller ships with larger ones, allowing more product to move per load. The larger ships cut energy up to 35%, he said.

The company also started carbon-neutral banana and pineapple programs last year, seeking to neutralize the carbon footprint from growing, harvesting, packing and distribution of the fruits in Costa Rica.

Once sustainable practices are in place, it is important to communicate efforts to consumers to get increased benefit from the programs. One way Dole is doing just that is by a sticker program on its organic bananas. Consumers can use a code on the bananas, go to Dole's Web site and see exactly where that banana comes from.

Companies have to think about their audience when communicating sustainable initiatives and their results and impacts.

"For shareholders, you really need dollars," Means said. "For consumers, you may need to use different units, like kilowatt hours or cars off the road."

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