

Triple threat: Bigelow recognized for eco-efforts



From Left to Right: Cindi Bigelow, President of R.C. Bigelow; Bob Wall, CTGBC President; Paul Popinchalk, CTGBC Board Member

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By Gary Jeanfaivre, Correspondent

Being a steward of the environment is good business, and for Fairfield-based Bigelow Tea, it's also about long-standing family values.

In addition to creating an extensive line of custom teas that comfort, soothe and satisfy tea drinkers worldwide, the company has made it a policy to work energy efficiency into every facet of its operations. Bigelow demonstrates how serious its is about sustainability by printing on two sides of paper, motion sensors on all lights, water-flow restrictions on sinks, timers on water heaters and a rooftop covered by 880 solar panels.

Not only is Bigelow seeing a return on its investment, it is getting recognition for its efforts. Last night -- on Earth Day -- the Connecticut Green Building Council bestowed upon Bigelow its Corporate Sustainability award during a reception at the company's headquarters on Black Rock Turnpike.

On March 31, Bigelow was recognized as a Business Leader for Energy Efficiency at the Northeast Energy Efficiency Summit in Boston. The company was nominated by Connecticut

Energy Efficiency Fund and the United Illuminating Co. for its continued efforts to advance energy efficiency, which has resulted in the savings of 1,147,000 kilowatt hours of energy and \$81,000 annually.

"Bigelow Tea has shown how energy-efficiency measures are significant in a company meeting its triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic value," said Jeff Gaudiosi, the chairman of Connecticut Energy Conservation Management Board. "Not only has the company been able to save money, critical for every company in this economic climate, but it has shown how energy efficiency has helped streamline its operations. Beyond energy efficiency, Bigelow is ultimately dedicated to doing the right thing."

Jim Gildea, plant manager in Fairfield, said the recognition is great. "It's important to note, though, that Bigelow has been involved with green and sustainability long before it became the `in' thing to do," he said.

The company's efforts to obtain a high level of energy efficiency date to the early '90s, Gildea said. "So for us, it's just a normal way of life," he said.

And while the company has realized savings from its efforts -- Bigelow meets 10 percent of its energy needs through its solar panels -- Gildea stressed that the company is motivated more by the Bigelow family values than financial incentives.

"They've really set a high standard," he said. "They're committed to the community and the environment."

That commitment, in part, was what led to the formation of green teams at each of its facilities -- at its 200,000-square-foot corporate headquarters and blending facility in Fairfield, as well as its plants in Boise, Idaho, and Louisville, Ky.

"Our employees certainly play a key role in our initiatives and the success of them at Bigelow," Gildea said.

The company was founded in 1945 by Ruth Campbell Bigelow and then run for 45 years by Eunice and David Bigelow. Their daughter, Cindi Bigelow, took over as president of the company five years ago and she said it has been her goal to have sustainable practices permeate every aspect of the company's operations. "It's always at the top of mind," she said. "It's something that I press very hard for."

Bigelow added, "I'm going to continue to be a driver and communicator of doing everything we can."

Dean Hearst, vice president of manufacturing at Bigelow's Fairfield facility, said the company has taken a holistic approach to its efficiency efforts.

"When we look at energy, we're also looking at materials. We're looking at how we use the building," he said.

As a result, the Fairfield facility has replaced its light bulbs with more efficient fluorescent ones; it introduced low-watering techniques for its landscaping needs; and replaced outdated air compressors and installed storage tanks so the machines could operate in off-peak hours. "It's all those things," Gildea said.

Bigelow also instituted a recycling effort, including paper, plastic, metal and wood. "We recycle pretty much everything here," Gildea said.

Hearst said that Bigelow's success in obtaining energy efficiencies would not have been possible without the support of the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund and UI. "They've been a very good partner for us," he said.

Still, like Gildea, Hearst said the main motivating factor is the Bigelow family values.

"Bigelow is a family-owned company and they have always been focused on how to do the right thing," he said