

Bigelow Tea to invest \$2 million on 'green' climate control system

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Recognized for its "green" efforts, Bigelow Tea Co. plans to invest \$2 million over the next couple years to enhance further the environmental friendliness of its Fairfield headquarters.

"The Bigelow family has such a commitment to doing the right thing, a commitment to the community and a commitment to the environment," said Jim Gildea, a plant manager for the family-owned specialty tea blender.

After spending almost \$1 million in 2005 on a 900-panel solar installation, privately-held Bigelow Tea plans to upgrade the 21-year-old building's heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment to use geo-thermal energy, which is generated and stored in the earth.

"We had a geo-thermal test well drilled to see if geo-thermal heating and cooling would be an option for us, which is certainly great for the environment," Gildea said.

The new HVAC system for the 110,000-square-foot building would reuse heat generated from equipment for space heating, improve upon the existing management control system and balance the air to prevent uncontrolled air from entering controlled spaces, Gildea said.

Bigelow Tea is implementing the costly upgrade as the company saw "outstanding" profits in the last year despite a down economy, said Carrie Hammond, Bigelow Tea's marketing manager.

"Tea does quite well in the recession," she said. "At least quality tea like ours is. It's a small luxury."

Bigelow paid \$1.5 million for the panels but received a \$750,000 rebate from the Connecticut Energy Efficiency Fund.

"The family probably would've done it even though 50 percent credit was received back," Hammond said. "But the family was definitely ready to make the investment."

Despite the initial expense, the projects are cost-effective in the long run, Gildea said.

The solar panels meet approximately 10 percent of the company's annual electricity requirement, resulting in a savings of 1,147,000-kilowatt hours and \$81,000 annually, according to the company.

Regional electric distribution company United Illuminating currently provides up to \$150,000 annually for the proposed HVAC system.

Construction is expected to begin during the company's next budget cycle, starting July 2011, and will take two years to fully complete, Gildea said.

As with the solar panel installation, the CEEF and UI pay companies incentives to incorporate energy efficient features, which then pay off in energy savings over time.

The company is also interested in rainwater harvesting, which "requires a significant financial commitment," Gildea said.

Participating in the Business Sustainability Challenge, a CEEF pilot program, Bigelow Tea in 2009 implemented several green measures, including switching from T12 to T8 fluorescent lighting fixtures, integrating a software system that shuts off 200 desktop computers at night and installing motion sensors throughout the building.

For its green upgrades, Bigelow was nominated by the CEEF and UI as a "Business Leader for Energy Efficiency" at the Northeast Energy Efficiency Summit in Boston, Mass., which took place last month.

CEEF Chairman Richard Steeves said energy efficiency benefits both the health of the environment and the economy.

"Every time we save energy, we also protect resources that are used to go into the making of that energy... and by conserving energy you reduce your bill, which means more money is available for the marketplace," he said.

The more businesses work to upgrade their facilities, the more jobs that means for the state, and "creating the green economy," Steeves said.

The environmentally responsible attitude of Bigelow Tea, which has 330 employees and facilities in Boise, Idaho and Louisville, Ky., is part of a long-standing tradition in the 65-year-old company, Gildea said.

"The Bigelow family has been committed to sustainability and green initiatives and doing the right thing before it became the in-thing to do," he said.