Concept presents win-win for business, environment

The term sustainable development is used by economists, planners and industry leaders as they collectively search for ways to continue our development to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Global warming, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and many other environmental issues are creating something of a "fear factor" when citizens of the world think about what the earth will be like in years to come. And while it's the responsibility of every individual to contribute, environmental consciousness is a business imperative these days and businesses need to pay attention.

At the same time, in our efforts to "save the planet," we citizens need to remember that to maintain a healthy economic future our businesses also need to turn a profit. That's a tough balancing act.

At a recent workshop promoting clean technology, Andy Mangan, executive director of the United States Business Council for Sustainable Development, discussed the concept of by-product synergy as one way of increasing profits while improving the environment.

Jonni Dron

Tri-City Economic Diversification

The purpose of the US BCSD is to deliver highly focused, collaborative projects that help its members and partners demonstrate leadership in the U.S. on sustainable development and realize business value.

As defined by the US BCSD, by-product synergy is the practice of matching undervalued waste or by-product streams with potential users, helping create new revenues or savings for the organizations involved while simultaneously addressing social and environmental impacts.

The US BCSD works with local businesses and governments to identify potential synergies in their processes. For example, a farmer may have agricultural waste that could be turned into oils or chemicals for making other products such as plastics or fabric. We've all heard the phrase "one person's garbage is another's gold."

That is exactly how these synergies work. The key is that businesses need to be talking about who has what and who needs it.

The benefits to finding these synergies can include reduced operating expenses, reduced emissions, improved productivity, surpassed regulatory targets, improved profitability, reduced energy use, improved community, and reduced waste as waste becomes product.

Locally, there are several businesses practicing by-product synergy. Some of these businesses include Penford, FruitSmart®, and Ice Harbor Brewery.

Penford Corporation, with a plant in Richland, takes waste water from a local potato processor and turns it into a usable starch.

The starch is then used in a batter that goes on french fries. To take it a step further, the company then takes its own waste water and runs it through an anaerobic digester using the resulting methane to run its boiler.

"For us, partnership is very important," said Craig Powers, plant manager for Penford's Richland plant. "Our supplier is also our customer so we must work closely together."

FruitSmart has a mission to create new products that enhance their customers' product lines and expand their business opportunities. One of the ways they do this is by working with the local wineries.

FruitSmart takes the press cake that is left when juice is squeezed out of grapes and uses it to make other products such as grape seed oil, flour and other ingredients for the culinary industry.

"This is an ecologically sound concept that makes sense in today's environmentally conscious world," said Jim Early, president of FruitSmart. "It's the reason we're in business."

Ice Harbor Brewing Company has been practicing by-product synergy since its inception as well. A local rancher has been collecting the company's spent grain mash and feeding it to his cattle.

This saves Ice Harbor the cost of disposal fees and provides valuable feed for the rancher's cattle.

"This kind of partnership is great for business and great for our community," said Mike Hall of Ice Harbor.

◗ *For more information on by-product synergy, go to: www.usbcsd.org/byproductsynergy.asp; www.usbcsd.org/byproductsynergy.asp>.*

◗ *Jonni Dron is with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at 375-6871.*