

PRESS REGISTER

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Group launches industrial recycling effort in Mobile

Synergy project turns one company's useless byproduct into another's resource

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In Theodore, Evonik Degussa sends chemical byproducts to companies that use it in fuel and fertilizer, reducing the plant's waste stream and saving \$750,000 annually.

Evonik is one of several local plants that have formed partnerships that involve sharing byproducts that would have been wasted to shrink their environmental footprints. Now, local industry group Partners for Environmental Progress, commonly known as PEP, hopes to expand local efforts.

Mobile-based PEP recently launched By-Product Synergy Gulf Coast, hosting a meeting in Mobile where representatives from about a dozen companies learned about and discussed the process. The Mobile initiative is one of six under way nationwide, according to project consultant Dennis Milligan, chief of operations for the U.S. Business Council for Sustainable Development.

Byproduct synergy essentially means turning one company's useless byproducts into another's resource. The program has enjoyed success in larger metro areas, including Chicago, where 90 companies and seven city departments have realized \$4.5 million in savings and new revenue in the past several years as a result of its ongoing Waste to Profit network, according to the council. In Salt Lake City, a cement plant uses surplus diapers and tire scraps to generate energy, reducing its coal consumption by

30 percent.

"It's very progressive for Mobile to be doing this — it speaks very highly of the local industrial community," Milligan said.

Partnerships save dollars

Locally, two of Evonik Degussa's partnerships — in which chemical byproducts are sold to both local and national companies that use it as an octane fuel booster and fertilizer additive, respectively — resulted in annual savings of

\$750,000 and waste reduction of 6.7 million pounds, according to Bill Klutz, the facility's environmental manager.

Although not a formal part of the By-Product Synergy effort, the programs are exactly the kind PEP wants to facilitate, said Jennifer Denson, executive director. Companies like Evonik can share the challenges and rewards with those that are newer to the effort, she said.

Recycling is "a huge positive for the environment," Klutz said. "(It) results in a decrease of emissions, a reduction in the use of energy such as imported oil, and a greater drive toward sustainability in the future."

That, in turn, makes an area more attractive to new industry, Denson said. Germany's Evonik Industries has a long history of recycling materials such as carbon steel, stainless steel, copper, aluminum and, locally, wood pallets, Klutz said.

By-Product Synergy plans to hold its second meeting in Mobile on Wednesday, and Milligan said the goal will be to assess progress and address any challenges that might have emerged.

One of the biggest barriers is cost, Denson said. Participating companies must pay \$3,500 to \$5,000 for the consulting and research involved. Then, once partnerships start, additional costs could follow.

Expenses — such as those involved in transporting the byproducts — can be considerable, but in many cases so are the returns, said Milligan, who retired from Dow Chemical Co. before joining the Austin, Texas-based nonprofit. For the past five years, Dow has spent about \$200,000 annually on a program in its Texas-Louisiana region, he said, which has resulted in about \$15 million in savings, he said.

"Dow had already been really progressive in minimizing its waste, and I really didn't think we would see much from (the new effort)," Milligan said. He ended up being pleasantly surprised.

Specifics of individual partnerships are typically confidential, Milligan said, which helps ensure that trade secrets stay secret.

From seat to soil

He revealed, however, that one part of the Dow project involves selling a urethane foam byproduct to a company that makes potting soil. "If you've got a car seat, it's probably made with urethane from Dow Chemical, and a lot of that becomes scrap," he said. "Foam is mostly air, and you put that in a landfill and it takes up a lot of volume."

Through the By-Product Synergy program, he said, "we found that (urethane) increases the water retention and volume of potting soil. We would have never thought of that without having a diverse group."

Denson hopes Mobile's group will come up with its own synergies. She said about 12 potential partnerships have been identified, and she hopes to see several realized by year's end.