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Milwaukee Brewing Joins Green Tier Program

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Milwaukee Brewing Company is growing at a fast clip, but it hasn't lost sight of its commitment to sustainability.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has admitted the brewer into its Green Tier program, which recognizes companies that are committed to sustainable practices that exceed environmental regulations.

Milwaukee Brewing Co. beer is sold throughout Wisconsin and in Chicago and is perhaps best known as the brew served at the Milwaukee Ale House. The company recently invested about \$175,000 to install solar hot water panels on the roof of its Walker's Point brewery.

It was recognized because of the energy reduction accomplished with the solar hot water system, as well as its other environmental efforts.

MBC purchases ingredients and equipment locally to reduce pollution, supplies spent grain to Milwaukee urban farm Growing Power for composting, reuses water from cooling fermentation tanks in the hot water system and schedules its production to minimize the number of cold start-ups.

The company also utilizes nearby restaurants' used cooking grease in its boiler, which supplies about 30 percent of its energy needs. MBC was the first Wisconsin microbrewery to install a canning line to use the 100 percent recyclable aluminum instead of bottles for some of its beer. It has also installed energy efficient lighting to save about 40 percent on energy costs and has a refrigeration heat reclamation system in place.

“From the very beginning, we've been trying to reduce the number of gallons of water it takes to make a beer,” said owner Jim McCabe. “When we bought our boilers, they were used on eBay, and we found ones that could burn oil and gas.”

In addition, the brewery has plans for future green projects including a bottle recycling program, a high efficiency upgrade of its natural gas boiler system, new windows and insulation and a cold air exchanger for its warehouse cooler.

Milwaukee Brewing Co. is on a tear, growing from 2,000 barrels of beer manufactured in 2010 to 10,000 expected for 2013, McCabe said.

“As we're moving forward, there's going to be a lot more opportunity, especially around water conservation and electrical power usage,” he said.

The DNR evaluated MBC's business practices to assure it wasn't a “green veneer” and helped the company develop one-year and five-year green goals.

“They take the initiative in the Green Tier program to identify craft breweries as an opportunity,” McCabe said. “This was one of those 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help' and it was actually true.”

In the first two weeks of using its solar hot water system, MBC was able to drastically reduce the energy needed to heat to 175 degrees the 300 gallons of water needed for brewing a batch. The solar power brought the temperature up to about 165 degrees, he said.

“A very important thing in Wisconsin is our natural resources—we have the largest fresh water system in the world,” McCabe told the crowd gathered at a recent Green Tier recognition event. “This is the beginning. We qualified for it and now we have to keep going.”

The Green Tier program is open to businesses, trade associations, communities and nonprofits. It tends to work well for food and beverage manufacturers because of their small margins and desire to lower costs without compromising quality, said Gregg Breese, business sector specialist-cooperative environmental assistance at the DNR.

The DNR requires that participants have a good environmental record, a willingness to exceed regulatory requirements, have an Environmental Management System in place, or plan to adopt one, and demonstrate ideas to improve performance in a way that will positively impact both the business and environment.

There are two tiers of the program. Tier 1 helps businesses set goals and form ideas. Tier 2 requires additional demonstration of excellent environmental stewardship and involves contracts that allow for customized regulatory flexibility aligned with the level of environmental performance. Associations can also enter into charters with the DNR to commit to aiding members in joining Green Tier.

Businesses in the program can benefit from having a single person to call at the DNR, deferred civil enforcement, reduced business costs and perks like modified monitoring requirements, alternative compliance methods and permit streamlining.

The program aims to create jobs, foster economic development, help businesses grow and protect the environment all at the same time, DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp said at the recognition event for MBC.

“You ought to be able to do business with the government, wanting to do the right thing, without having to trip up and getting hammered for that,” Stepp said. “Milwaukee has great leaders here who are willing to invest in environmental sustainability initiatives.”

There are about 75 microbreweries in Wisconsin. MBC joins fellow microbrewers Lakefront Brewery Inc. of Milwaukee, Capital Brewery of Middleton and Central Waters Brewing Company of Amherst in the Green Tier program.