



Sokol Blosser Winery | 2005 Sustainability Report

By Susan Sokol Blosser, President

Sustainability is becoming a buzzword in our culture, but the more I learn, the farther away I realize we are from dealing with the issues of pollution and waste creation, and resource reduction of fish, timber, oil, and so much more. Some scientists feel it is too late to save the planet; others feel there is time if we act now. We got into this state because we are so attuned to our short term interests we don't look at the consequences of our actions as individuals on the system as a whole-on our planet. Maybe this is changing. A recent column in the New York Times by Tom Friedman decried Dick Cheney's calling living green a private "personal virtue." Indeed, Friedman claimed, it is a "national imperative."

Understanding that the earth is experiencing a buildup of waste and toxins that have nowhere to go and which have overloaded the natural capacity of the earth to restore its balance, and that we humans, especially Americans, are responsible for this destruction-well, that is a radicalizing realization and has driven the changes we have been able to make at Sokol Blosser. The following is a recap of our challenges and progress in 2005.

NATURAL STEP TRAINING:

Our goal is to view the world through the lens of the Natural Step's four system conditions (www.ortns.org) as a guiding force towards sustainability.

- 1) We started out the year with a staff training. Regina Hauser, the Director of the Oregon Natural Step Network came to the winery for a training session for the whole SB staff. Many of our employees took what they learned to heart and made changes in their personal lives to be more environmentally sustainable (see Employee section below).
- 2) I organized a Natural Step introduction for local wineries. All Willamette Valley wineries were invited to a presentation at the Dundee Bistro on The Natural Step and achieving sustainability across the whole winery operation. Regina Hauser made this presentation. Many of the wineries who indicated they were interested in sustainability were not able to attend and I was disappointed that only about 10 people came. This is not a burning issue for most people.

PACKAGING:

- 1) Finally, all our wine labels were printed on 30% post consumer waste recycled content paper. We had hoped for a higher percentage but the wet strength wasn't there above 30%. However, this represents a big move forward from our old metallic labels. It has taken 3 years to get to this point. In 2004, we were only able to print one label (Meditrina) on recycled paper. The backing of the pressure sensitive labels continues to be a clear plastic that we are able to recycle.
- 2) We revised our Tasting Room brochure and our Cellar Club brochure and were able to print both on 100% post consumer waste recycled content, processed chlorine free, using soy based inks.
- 3) Our holiday catalog was printed on 50% recycled, 15% post consumer, elemental chlorine free. This was the best we could afford and I hope next year we can do better.
- 4) We are working with BASF on a cradle to cradle recycling program for Styrofoam shippers. The idea is that consumers could mail used shippers to a recycling point where BASF would redirect them to make new shippers. We hope to debut this pilot program in 2006--still a few hurdles to jump.

VINEYARD

- 1) Organic certification—achieved after a three year transition period. Oregon Tilth was the certifier for the USDA. This will allow us, if we choose, to put "made with organically grown grapes" on the labels of our 2005 vintage estate wines.
- 2) This year saw an explosion of the vole (field mice) population which had serious consequences for our vineyard. I had decided to put straw bale mulch between the vines. My reasoning was that the straw would conserve moisture for the vines, prevent unwanted growth under the vines and therefore several tractor trips down the rows to eliminate that growth, and that the straw would provide food for the microbial life in the soil. I only did a few acres. Mulching was expensive to do, requiring buying the straw and considerable labor to put the bales in place, but I was so pleased with it that I was considering mulching the whole vineyard. Then, in late August, we discovered that the reason leaves on our Pinot Noir vines were turning red was that voles had girdled the vines at the base, eating away all the bark and disrupting the flow of nutrients from the roots to the canopy. The voles had been able to hide in the straw and form a system of hidden paths, out of reach of predators. Our hawks, owls, and cats couldn't compete. We immediately pulled the straw out but it was too late. We won't know how many vines we lost to vole damage until spring but I fear it's a lot. I was horrified, chagrined, discouraged—I had caused significant vineyard destruction by an action I had taken for all the right reasons.
- 3) We continued our biodynamic experiment on our seven acres of Pinot Gris.
- 4) We are building bigger compost piles every year. I thought our 100 foot long pile last year was big, but this year we built four large piles, still with organic cow manure, straw, grape pomace. We didn't have enough of our own pomace for all this and Argyle Winery in Dundee delivered theirs to us.

GENERAL

- 1) At our big Luau celebration of the release of the 9th edition of Evolution, we procured biodegradable plates, forks and spoons for our guests.
- 2) At our Cellar Club Harvest dinner, we worked with Bon Appetit Management Co. to provide a dinner made with fresh, local, sustainable ingredients. It was terrific.
- 3) We increased the amount of renewable (wind) power purchased thru PGE from 1167 kWh per month to 4083 kWh per month. This doesn't cover all our energy needs but was what we could afford. We are starting again to research using solar panels.
- 4) We were surprised and pleased to be one of three finalists in Sunset Magazine's wine awards for Green Winery of the Year, along with Benziger and Frog's Leap. We were disappointed not to be the final winner, but were honored to be named along with two California wineries known for their great wine and environmental ethics.
- 5) We have some wonderful old trees at our winery and during the summer hired an arborist to help us save the old oaks and bigleaf maples in our picnic area through pruning and nutrition.
- 6) After our Natural Step training session, Patty Meuchel, tasting room manager, looked at her domain with new insight. She reports that she started buying toilet paper and paper towels with higher recycled content, bought energy saving bulbs for the fixtures, switched to organic cleaning products, came up with a recycling program for Cellar Club members' shipments, and bought organic cheese to sell in the tasting room. Bravo!
- 7) We eliminated a big section of lawn to create more park-like space with native plants—a continuation of our shady picnic area outside the tasting room.

EMPLOYEES:

I asked employees if they had done anything in 2005 that they considered steps towards sustainability. Here are a few of the replies.

- 1) Patty reported she and her husband are more careful about what they throw away and have set up an easy-to-use recycling area in their garage. This has enabled them to downsize their garbage can. She also finds herself seeking out more organic products.
- 2) Barbara, our controller, reported she and her husband started buying more organic products and stepped up their recycling program. Not only paper, glass and cans at curbside, but now garden prunings go to a local composter. When they had trouble with carpenter ants, they sought a company that used organic pesticides. And no more farmed salmon in their household!
- 3) Scott, our national sales lead, got tired of spending so much on gas and bought a Prius. This is the fifth Prius in the Sokol Blosser clan (Susan, Nik, Bill, and Aunt Taffy all own one as well).