

FACES OF SUSTAINABILITY: MARIN COUNTY

The Faces of Sustainability series highlights how residents of the San Francisco Bay Area are making their community a better place to live, protecting their natural environment, and conducting business in ways that promote quality of life for subsequent generations.



Bay Area Counties

Marin County's landscape is strikingly different from some other parts of the San Francisco Bay area. Heroic efforts by citizen activists, government, and enlightened businesspeople in past decades have preserved large fragments of ecosystems that have been lost elsewhere—Muir Woods, Point Reyes, Golden Gate Headlands, and the agricultural lands of West Marin are striking examples. Averting county-wide mega-sprawl proved to be an early win for sustainability. Then in 1999, Marin County's Board of Supervisors determined that sustainability would be the overarching theme of the Countywide Plan. The 2007 draft update of the Plan is based on a set of guiding principles for planning sustainable communities grounded in the three E's of environment, economy, and equity.

Local sustainability groups sprang up early on and have been promoting actions and programs related to sustainability, and local city councils have begun steps to implement sustainability programs. Dozens of green businesses have been certified, and local agriculture, including organic,

remains a key factor firmly upheld by county policy, planning, and zoning.

Currently, the greatest sustainability challenge for Marin is to reduce its ecological footprint, which is one of the highest per capita in the Bay Area. Overall, Marin residents use a lot of resources, primarily in the areas of transportation and energy in buildings, and generate a lot of waste. Marin is leading the way in utilizing the ecological footprint as a measure of progress. "We have found that presenting the Ecological Footprint in the first chapter of our general plan update provides a compelling context for the need to plan more sustainable communities," says Alex Hinds, Director of Community Development. The Countywide Plan calls for "increasing use of renewable energy, fuel-efficient transportation, and green building and business practices similar to the level of Western Europe [much lower than the United States generally, and Marin in particular]." Many programs are now in place and already showing progress; those described below are only a few examples.

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Energy

Partnering with the U.S. Department of Energy's "Million Solar Roofs" initiative, Marin has set a goal of 600 solar systems installed countywide by 2010. The county has reduced solar fees, fast-tracked permitting, provided energy-efficiency rebates, sent targeted mailings to locations in prime solar corridors, and trained a staff for a countywide free assistance program for residents and businesses thinking about going solar. Services include site surveys, contractor and bid comparisons, and workshops. As a result of all these programs, the amount of energy generated (at any given moment) through solar has gone from ½ megawatt in 2000 to 5MW in 2007—still a small amount of Marin's total energy use, but a significant increase. One major example is the 89kW solar array, installed in 2004, that powers the garage at Marin's Civic Center.

Renters as well as homeowners are helped to become more energy efficient through the Energy Watch Partnership. A grant funded by ratepayer bill charges through the state Public Utilities Commission enables the county to work with schools and local communities to do energy audits and retrofits. A summer training program of the nonprofit California Youth Energy Services sends youth door-to-door in residential neighborhoods, including low-income areas, to discuss possible energy improvements and provide compact fluorescent light bulbs,

water-saving faucetheads, and retractable clotheslines at no cost.

In addition to the programs already in place, in November 2006 the Marin Board of Supervisors voted funds to do an implementation plan for becoming a community choice electricity aggregator in order to meet its commitment of a 15-20% reduction in greenhouse gases from 1990 levels by 2015. In May 2007 county and city officials agreed that Marin's community choice plan should aim at more than 50 percent renewable power as quickly as possible while meeting or beating PG&E's rates, accelerating build-up of local renewable capacity, and taking full advantage of available state energy efficiency and conservation funding through a joint-powers Marin Power Authority.

Agriculture

At the turn of the 20th century, Marin County was the number one dairy county in California, but industrial agriculture and rising land prices following World War II made the county's dairies and small farms an endangered species. As a result, in 1980 the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) was formed, the first land trust in the country to preserve agricultural land in perpetuity. Since 1988 MALT has worked with local farmers and ranchers to obtain conservation easements and keep land away from developers. Easements now include at least 50 ranches covering more than

Marin Independent Journal columnist Dick Spotswood says, "Marin got it right in the 1970s" by creating an agriculture zone, reserving all future development to the eastern side of the County.

33,000 acres, roughly one-fourth of the private agricultural land in Marin.

Looking beyond land preservation alone, Marin Organic was founded in 1999 as a cooperative association of Marin County organic producers who practice stewardship based on respect for nature and a sense of place. Marin Organic's mission focuses on the economic viability as well as the environmental soundness of farming and ranching in Marin County. The large amount of prime agricultural land in Marin, along with its location in the highly educated, affluent, environmentally conscious Bay Area made it an ideal place to foster organic farming. To be truly sustainable, says Marin Organic Executive Director Helge Hellberg, we need food that is both organic and local. Not only does local farming eliminate the huge energy costs of transporting our food long distances, it contributes directly to the future of the farm, builds community, and provides jobs. Marin's many small organic farms make it a leader in this area. "At the Pt. Reyes Farmer's Market," Hellberg says, "all the food comes from no more than a bike-ride away."

One Marin agricultural enterprise that goes even beyond local and organic is the county's leading organic dairy, Straus Family Creamery. In May 2004, the Creamery began creating electricity from its new methane digester, which captures naturally occurring

gas from manure and converts it into electricity. With this system, Straus is expected to generate up to 650,000 kilowatt hours per year, at the same time eliminating methane, a significant contributor to greenhouse gases. The dairy project takes advantage of the net metering law, which allows the entire Straus operation to run meters in reverse as excess electricity is sent back into the grid. While all waste at Straus dairy is composted and reused as fertilizer, Allen Dusault of Sustainable Conservation says the generation system provides "a triple win, producing cleaner air and water and a new source of renewable energy."

The Environmental Action Committee of West Marin (EAC) and Sierra Club are also promoting going beyond organic to a sustainable agriculture that links food systems to ecosystems and the grocery list to the endangered species list by reducing sediment and nutrient transport with stream buffers of native plants; increasing overall ecological diversity and improving habitat for native species; and using organic production methods that satisfy these ecological concerns.

Transportation

Transportation in car-loving Marin is one of the county's major sustainability challenges. In large part because of the consumption of fossil fuels, which is actually increasing in the county even though the population is not, Marin's greenhouse gas emissions

"Though people tend to think of organic food as expensive, in reality, the hidden resource, energy, and health costs make nonorganic agriculture the most expensive form of agriculture we can have."

—Helge Hellberg,
Executive Director, Marin Organic

are increasing. To counter this trend, says county sustainability planner Dawn Weisz, Marin's Countywide Plan promotes increased use of public transit, easier connections between communities, and more mixed-use communities so that residents can walk to businesses and services. Biodiesel fuel is now used for all county diesel-operated vehicles and machinery, including generators. And almost every new non-diesel vehicle purchased for the county fleet (turnover is approximately every 7 years) will be a hybrid.

To get people out of vehicles entirely, WalkBikeMarin is an initiative by the county to encourage walking and bicycling as everyday transportation, and more bike lanes are being added to county roads. Marin cities such as Fairfax are participating in the California Safe Routes to School program, whose goals include more children walking and bicycling to and from schools.

Housing

Transportation and housing are closely linked because where people live is a large determinant of how they travel to work, shopping, or other activities. Marin's new Countywide Plan is encouraging redevelopment of underused infill sites within existing communities that are close to transit, employment, and public services. The first such effort is Marinwood Village, which will redevelop the stagnant Marin-

wood Plaza shopping center into a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented village center. The result of a 1-1/2 year planning process involving the county, the property owner, and local residents, the project will include a cornerstone market and other business as well as 100 units of housing, 50% of which will be affordable for moderate- or low-income households, helping Marin also meet the third E of sustainability—equity.

In addition, new housing units originally projected for West Marin have been moved closer to transit corridors, which will have the effect of preserving open space as well as reducing the need for vehicle use.

Waste Reduction

The throwaway culture is still alive and well in Marin County, and reducing waste is one of the county's main sustainability goals. By signing the international Urban Environmental Accords in 2006, the Board of Supervisors signaled Marin's ultimate goal of producing zero waste by the year 2040, meaning that virtually everything "discarded" would be reused, recycled, or composted. The county has been promoting recycling and resource conservation, and, although the actual tons of waste have been increasing, according to Marin Sanitary by 2003, 75% of the waste was being diverted from landfill, a higher rate than any other county in the Bay Area.

Several innovative programs

are helping Marinites produce less waste. Marin's Construction and Demolition Waste Recovery ordinance requires that for any building or demolition project, 50% or more of the scrap materials must be reused or recycled at an approved facility. The Waste Tire Program promotes awareness of the hazards of improper disposal of waste tires, and the use of recycled tire products such as floor mats and tiles, ramps, asphalt, decking, and garden mulch. A mobile, interactive, educational Waste Tire Display is now available to be showcased at local government offices, tire dealerships, and other related locations. MarinMax is a free materials exchange website that allows businesses, non-profits, and individuals within Marin County to swap, barter, or exchange items they

The Integrated Pest Management Ordinance, passed in 1998, made a big difference in the Marin Civic Center's cafeteria. Previously sprayed weekly with Dursban as prophylactic for cockroaches, the Center has instead caulked the cracks in the kitchen and does a good job of cleaning up after meals – to the point that no pesticide spraying has been necessary since IPM began.

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no longer need or acquire goods someone else is trying to get off their hands.

Green Business

Marin's Green Business Program is a voluntary partnership among the county, business leaders, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The program recognizes and promotes businesses that demonstrate consistent compliance with environmental regulations; conserve energy, water, and other materials; prevent pollution and waste generation; and share environmentally responsible practices with other businesses. The Green Business Program provides businesses with streamlined environmental assistance, improved operations through innovations, and money-saving opportunities. Participating Green Businesses also benefit from promotions, local advertising, and public recognition.

Started in 2003, the Green Business Program now has almost 200 participating businesses. The Environmental Education Council of Marin runs a Sustainable Business Network and has launched "Creating Sustainable Businesses," which is developing a template to help businesses evaluate their practices regarding the environment and devise strategies to improve them. EECOM also presents work-

Sustainability Resources in Marin County

Refer to the following selected information resources to learn more about sustainability in Marin County.

Official Website: www.co.marin.ca.us/default1024.asp

Marin County Community Development Agency Sustainability Team: www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/CD/main/comdev/advance/Sustainability.cfm

Countywide Plan: www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/CD/main/fm/cwpcodes/CWP_Draft_June_2007.pdf

Green Business Program: www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/CD/Main/comdev/advance/green_business/

Environmental Action Committee of West Marin: www.eacmarin.org/

Environmental Education Council of Marin: www.eecom.net/

Marin Agricultural Land Trust: www.malt.org/

MarinMax: www.marinmax.org/

Marin Organic: www.marinorganic.com/

Marin Sanitary Service: www.marinsanitary.com/

Straus Family Creamery: www.strausfamilycreamery.com/?section=Healthy%20Farms

WalkBikeMarin: www.walkbikemarin.org/

shops such as "Marketing Sustainable Products and Services."

Conclusion

Though Marin County still faces many challenges in meeting its sustainability goals, as this case study shows, the county, individual communities, businesses, and

nonprofit organizations, in conjunction with residents, have been taking significant steps to reduce their ecological footprint.

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Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities
www.bayareaalliance.org