

Waste Reduction Takes Off at Alaska Airlines

Alaska Airlines, a Seattle-based carrier that serves destinations in the United States, Canada and Mexico, is committed to environmental stewardship and has built a strong waste reduction and recycling program both in the air and on the ground. In 2011, the company recycled more than 830 cubic yards of waste from its airplanes—everything from paper and cold cups to coffee grounds—and 100,000 pounds of steel from its Seattle hangar alone. Seattle Business Magazine recognized the airline among the winners of the 2011 Washington Green Awards and named it to the 2011 Washington Green 50 list, on which it took top honors among its peers by winning the service category. Among other categories, the airline was lauded for its in-flight recycling program that captured 46 percent of recyclable materials in 2010.

Although it would appear that such a robust program couldn't fly any higher, Alaska Airlines partnered with ENGIE Insight's Waste Management Solutions team to overhaul the long-standing recycling program in its five corporate office facilities located in the Seattle metro area, resulting in a 73 percent reduction in spend. Here's how they succeeded.

Step 1: Waste Audit

ENGIE Insight audited the trash and recycling streams in Alaska Airlines' office buildings, facilitated an RFP for recycling services to choose a new vendor, and implemented a new waste prevention and diversion program.

Through this process, ENGIE Insight discovered that although employees were already doing a good job of separating trash from recycling with very little contamination, inconsistent messaging and recycling bin availability caused some missed opportunities to divert recyclable materials from the trash.

ENGIE Insight recommended specific actions in response to this analysis, including:

- Implement a more user-friendly, standardized single-stream waste diversion program
- Re-energize and expand communication with employees
- Engage suppliers to participate in the recycling program while on company property
- Research logistics of initiating future separate diversion programs for items not allowed in the single-stream program, such as styrofoam

Step 2: Single-Stream Waste Diversion Plan

To help Alaska Airlines employees divert the most waste with minimal effort, ENGIE Insight supported implementation of a new single-stream waste diversion program to be serviced by a local nonprofit recycling vendor selected through the RFP process.



At a Glance

Results:

Recycling volume has increased by 20 percent, supporting waste diversion efforts equivalent to filling nearly three 737-800 passenger planes

Right-sizing, facilitation of a recycling RFP and initiating a new recycling program have all reduced waste expenses by more than 73 percent



CASE STUDY

Rather than sorting paper, plastics and other recyclable materials in separate containers spread out throughout the building, employees simply send all recyclable materials through a single, desk-side bin for sorting offsite by the recycling vendor. This also allowed more recycling bins and easier employee access. Additionally, this vendor has the ability to weigh the recycled material at each pick-up, enabling Alaska Airlines to incrementally track the success of their program. Selection of the new recycling vendor also fostered a positive community benefit that is in line with Alaska Airline's corporate social responsibility efforts, as the vendor funds area alcohol and drug recovery programs.

Step 3: New Communication Plan

While the single-stream change simplified the recycling process, it also required communication with employees about revised procedures. Alaska Airlines and ENGIE Insight created a robust communication plan as part of the change, including e-mail blasts, new streamlined photo-heavy signage showing what could be recycled and lunch-and-learn sessions with the recycling vendor.

During the audit, ENGIE Insight also discovered that one facility had a significant quantity of vendor packing in the trash—vendors that were onsite to fill vending machines or deliver supplies were simply throwing their packaging in the trash. The airline reached out to these regular site visitors to ensure they understood and embraced the efforts to increase recycling rates, and the single-stream recycling option made it even easier for vendors to participate.

Results

After implementing the single-stream program, Alaska Airlines saw impressive reductions in the volume of plastics, mixed paper, cardboard and mixed metals that were destined for landfills.

Across implemented sites, the changes made by ENGIE Insight and the airline reduced annual trash volume by 830 cubic yards. Waste diversion efforts equate to nearly filling three 737-800 passenger planes.

Project activities—right-sizing, facilitation of recycling RFP and initiating a new recycling program—have reduced Alaska Airline's waste expenses by more than 73 percent, savings that directly impact its bottom line.

Looking Forward

Even more waste diversion opportunities exist for Alaska Airlines, and the next steps include:

- Expansion of the single-stream waste diversion program to the remainder of its facilities
- Review and implementation of recommendations for organic recycling (composting)
- Implementation of waste diversion recommendations that do not currently fit the single-stream program, such as styrofoam



See More

Gain visibility into current service levels and identify opportunities for waste stream optimization.



Save More

Reduce waste expenses by choosing the best waste haulers and right-sizing individual waste stream service levels.



Sustain More

Implement Zero Waste initiatives to reduce the amount of material sent to landfill and minimize environmental impacts.

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