



SUSTAINABILITY

MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Races share what they're doing to make a difference for the planet

By Leah Etling

For brands and events alike, the need to be conscious and proactive about environmental impacts has never been greater. Consumers are increasingly aware of corporate values and seeking out businesses and events that take positive action for a cleaner earth. In a consumer sentiment report released last year by IBM, 57 percent of respondents said they were willing to change their purchasing habits to reduce negative environmental impact. Younger consumers are even more likely to take notice, with 62 percent of Millennials stating that they prefer to buy from sustainable brands, according to Forbes.

"I worry about when and where, not if, climate protests will come to road racing," wrote Keith Peters, board member for the Council for Re-

sponsible Sport (Council) and retired Executive Director of the organization. "Our events are certainly not the most egregious consumers of fossil fuels, though airline travel to any big 'destination race' results in significant emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. I'd say the likelihood of climate protests at road races is pretty high just because we present an attractive nuisance of sorts." ([Read the full blog post by Peters.](#))

At leading hydration brand Nuun, the company became a Climate Neutral Certified Brand by measuring its greenhouse gas emissions when producing and delivering products, and taking action to reduce, eliminate or offset them. Climate Neutral Certified brands must repeat the process each year. As a partner of many U.S. running events and vendor member of Run-



ning USA, Nuun has devoted resources to educating and supporting the industry in its efforts to be greener. [The Practical Guide to Hosting Radically Responsible Events](#), launched at Running USA 2020 in partnership with Nuun and the Council, is an excellent place for events to start improving their sustainability practices.

“The first thing to do is to invest in knowing your impact and setting goals. That is truly the first thing to do,” said Lia Colabello, a sustainability consultant who works with Nuun and recommends that all events make use of the Practical Guide. “That takes resources – people, time, and leadership to prioritize that. But I would start there.”

Shelley Villalobos, Managing Director of the Council, says that the challenges of the last year have helped illuminate ways that events can reduce their impact – like virtual events – but have also showed how dependent the industry is on fossil fuels. Regretfully, the best way to eliminate emissions is to stop traveling altogether.

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“We still need a lot of investment to get to the point where we’re reducing demand for fossil fuels enough,” Villalobos said. “Carbon offsets are not the ideal solution.”

She hopes that the collective power of the running industry could become a force for impact-

ful change. “How great would it be for the road racing industry to say we’re all going to choose a project that would mathematically have a positive impact and all pitch in on that? For the millions of runners who want to act and be accountable – it doesn’t matter how many races they run, but they could be pooling into that project – it would be exciting to see how that would pay out.”

Running events that have committed to sustainability saw both challenges and opportunities over the last year. Here are some of their stories.

OFFSETTING TRAVEL AND REDUCING WASTE AT CHERRY BLOSSOM

Awarded Gold Level status by the Council for Responsible Sport, Washington D.C.’s “runners’ rite of spring,” the Credit Union Cherry Blossom (CUCB) 10 mile race, was among the first event to offer runners the option to purchase carbon offset credits to reduce the impact of their race day travel. CUCB began offering offsets more than a decade ago.

“95 percent of all emissions from races are from participant travel. That’s the place we need to focus quickly if we are going to successfully make a dent in our impact,” Villalobos said.

CUCB partnered with Native Energy, a corporate sustainability facilitator, to handle runners’ offset dollars. Since 2010, more than \$45,000 has been donated and runners are becoming more aware of the consequences of their travel. Prior to the event’s COVID-prompted 2020 cancellation, the race was on track to have its largest offset donation ever. Kim Nemire, CUCB volunteer sustainability coordinator, explained that the race has worked diligently on messaging and targeted participant communications to achieve those results.

“If starting an offset program, put together a communication plan to generate awareness



▲ *The Cowtown Green Team is passionate enough about sustainability to sort the garbage.*

and explain why, and then make it as easy to opt in as possible. Including the option with other add-ons during registration works well for us,” Nemire said. She believes the event’s relatively low price point of \$50 aids runners’ willingness to pay for an offset credit.

The offsets are just one small part of CUCB’s sustainability program. “We are really proud that we do enough to achieve Gold certification from the Council. That includes diverting around 90% of the 10 tons of waste that the race generates annually. We’re also proud to be working toward the elimination of most of the post-race plastic water bottles, which is still a work in progress,” Nemire said.

Other initiatives have included: implementing paperless registration, offering virtual goodie bags, opt-in medals, collecting used running shoes from participants, asking vendors to minimize and recycle packaging, donating unused event food, donating discarded clothing from the course, upcycling HeatSheets and composting food waste.

The ultimate sign of success for CUCB, though, will be when its highly visible Green Team, which wears lime green shirts on race day, is no longer needed. That’s a long term goal.

“To get to a point where a sustainability team is no longer needed because sustainable practices have been integrated into every activity, ingrained in every decision and have become second nature for everyone involved with the event. That would be amazing,” Nemire said.

FEWER CUPS, MORE COMPOST AT THE COWTOWN

While many events have expressed concern that the pandemic moved them backward in terms of sustainability initiatives, one race that had a positive experience was The Cowtown in Fort Worth. Despite being held on a smaller scale than usual in May of 2021, a concentrated effort to have runners supply their own hydration was a major step forward for the event.

Executive Director Heidi Swartz estimated that up to 75 percent of Cowtown runners came prepared to handle their own hydration needs with wearable devices like a hydration vest or belt. The race offered water stations for refilling runners' vessels, and those who did not bring their own water bottles could make use of compostable cups.

"If you tell people there will not be hydration on the course unless they bring it, then they will bring it," noted Villalobos. "COVID pushed us far faster to that place than we would be otherwise."

Switching to the compostable single use cups along the course in 2020 made a huge difference in the amount of compost produced by the 2021 Cowtown Half Marathon, said Heath Aucoin, volunteer sustainability coordinator. The Cowtown produced 100 pounds of compost from its 2019 event, and that jumped to 2600 pounds in 2020, primarily due to adding the cups. Hydration partner Gatorade helped make them possible.

Aucoin decided to focus on compost as one of the event's initiatives because it aligned with community efforts in Fort Worth. A local company, Cowboy Compost, picks up the event's compostable waste.

"You really need to coincide what you're planning with what your community is doing. We're trying to use sport as a vehicle to introduce people to these important lifestyle concepts," Aucoin explained. Runner education is never easy, but critical. It starts before the event in runner communications and includes detailed signs about what waste can be thrown in which bins.

"Sustainability is not easy. You have to be diligent, and the communication has to be over and over and over again," he said. And all those efforts may not be enough. To prevent compost and recycling contamination, the ideal setup is to have a trained volunteer monitoring every

refuse station. At the post-event festivities, it's most ideal to take runners' trash from them at a station and have a trained volunteer sort it into waste streams.

Next year, Aucoin hopes to place a dedicated sustainability volunteer at each of 26 individual water stations, which would more than double the number of volunteers working specifically on Cowtown environmental programs. One tip he offered: look for college students in environmental programs or others already interested in sustainability to help.

"It's a little bit easier when somebody has a passion for green initiatives to dig in garbage. Because that's really what you do all day," he noted.

The Cowtown has also earned Gold Level status from the Council for Responsible Sport for its sustainability initiatives.

A VENDORS' PERSPECTIVE

At Running USA vendor member Waste Management (WM), a dedicated division supports comprehensive sustainability program design and implementation for professional sports venues, teams and leagues. Lee Spivak, Managing Principal of WM's [sport and entertainment team](#), explained that proactive environmental practices have been a longtime priority for one of the country's largest environmental services providers.

"We are committed to providing comprehensive solutions that cover a variety of environmental impacts – materials, water, emissions, engagement, and reporting. To do so, we review event operations and their organizational structure," said Spivak. "It's essential to ensure that sustainability is embedded in the formal processes of event management since environmental priorities are more effective when they are positioned alongside other company objectives."



▲ CUCB volunteers with recyclable cups from Gatorade.

For an example of how WM has holistically implemented sustainability and social responsibility at a major sports event, check out the 2020 WM Phoenix Open Sustainability Report, billed “the Greenest Show on Grass.”

From the grass to the track, WM also works with organizations within the running industry, including the New York Road Runners, to implement sustainability-related best practices at races of all sizes.

When establishing an effective sustainability program, Spivak recommends starting at the top with leaders who are committed to making sustainability a consistent consideration, not just a priority when a major event rolls around.

“It’s about directing your team to consider environmental impacts when making everyday decisions. An internal commitment will help ensure that sustainability is a formal part of the planning process rather than being a siloed department or a secondary thought,” he said. “To embed sustainability in an event’s DNA, managers must make sure it’s part of the beginning stages of planning for operations, vendor and sponsor engagement, and marketing.”

Vendor management is especially important and can be a cornerstone change for running events that wish to reduce their environmental footprint.

“We help organizations and events map out their stakeholders, create a unique engagement and data collection strategy, add measures to ensure vendors comply with environmental priorities, and create a strong foundation that makes partners want to support sustainability goals instead of just feeling like they are complying with requirements,” Spivak said. Such partnerships can help events expand and improve their sustainability efforts each year. //

Are you innovating creative sustainability practices at your event? We’d love to hear about them.

Write to content@runningusa.org to share your story and possibly be featured in a future edition of Race Director Magazine.