



## White Paper: Applying a ‘Sustainability Lens’ to Road Race Events and Host Organizations

By Shelley Villalobos

Managing Director, Council for Responsible Sport

Most road race organizers I talk to want to do right by the environment and be seen by their audiences as doing so, but aren’t always sure what that means in practice beyond putting out recycling bins next to the trashcans. There’s also a misconception that sustainability is something separate from existing operations.

In my six years of researching, evaluating, discussing and reporting on sustainability at events with the Council for Responsible Sport, I’ve found that in hosting events, sustainability is nothing more or less than a lens through which to assess activities. (As opposed to a prescribed set of activities such as *‘thou shall eliminate single-use plastic beverage bottles from thy events!’*). Such a lens can help organizers more clearly identify what they value and whether their current operations are truly aligned.

Before jumping into a brief recommended pathway for applying a ‘sustainability lens’ to your event, let’s clarify the term ‘sustainability,’ which can be frustratingly broad. The word most commonly refers to the concept of ‘sustainable development,’ defined by the United Nations in 1987 as *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* In short, sustainability means working to ensure the possibility of perpetuity.

The hard-to-accept reality is that collectively, we humans are currently downright failing to ensure the sustainability we’d hope to pass to future generations. Current practices that seriously threaten our ability to ‘keep on keeping on’ have become culturally normal but are biologically bizarre.

Take waste at events as a relevant example. In the natural world, there is no such thing as waste. Byproducts are always assimilated or metabolized (their elements turned back into earth). And while



disposable cups and energy gel wrappers may be necessary for convenient refueling for endurance athletes, these items take the natural world a very long time to reintegrate.

Other 'normal' practices with consequences for the natural world come into play in nearly all we do as we practice 'business as usual'. From using fossil fuels for energy (expos/electricity, generators, travel), to material consumption ([ever been curious what it takes to make a basic t-shirt?](#)), to farming practices for growing food, human activities have profound and decidedly non-sustainable impacts on our environment that are now resulting in the existential threat of climate change. [A recent national report](#) of the wide-ranging impacts of a changing climate to the U.S. economy is dire reading (U.S. Global Change Research Program, U.S. Federal Government, 2018). And that's just the economy. Need I remind us that there can be no economy on a dead planet? And unfortunately, those are the stakes at hand; we've reached a historically unprecedented moment in which our generation (next 30 years) will literally determine whether life as we know it will continue on this gem of a planet we call home.

The good news is, you probably either have a champion, or you ARE the sustainability champion of your event (if not, start asking around!). Although scientific truths of the planet we live *on* don't always agree with the society we live *in*, there is lots of momentum to correct course.

There are many things event(s) can do to become more aware of the event-planning decisions that have a material impact on the environment and make changes that align with a desire to be part of the solution.

Here's a short list of our recommendations for educating yourself, your teams and taking action. Isn't it time to [#getoffthesidelines?](#)

**You'll need a plan.** Again, you're going to need a plan. It doesn't have to be fancy, but it does need to be real and you will need input from many sources and stakeholders (participants, government representatives, vendors, service providers, etc.)

### Step 1: Take stock

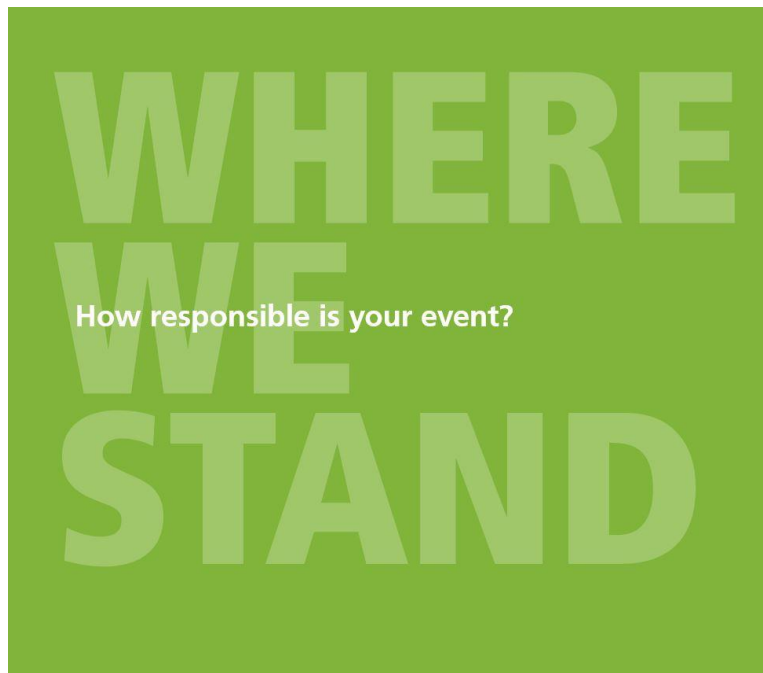
- 1) Get curious. Get everything 'on the table'. Go through the list of departments, or the event operations plan, or however you all organize what you do, and apply the 'sustainability lens' to each of those areas.
- 2) Talk amongst your team, asking:
  - What are we already doing and doing well?
  - What are we not doing that we would like to eventually be doing?
  - What does our target audience think we should be doing that we have not done (or don't know how to do?) If you can't confidently answer this question, ask them!
  - What are the industry best practices? How do we measure up?

THE LOS ANGELES MARATHON ASKED RUNNERS HOW MUCH THEY CARE ABOUT CERTAIN SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS. HERE'S WHAT THEY HEARD:

- 75% OF RESPONDENTS SAID IT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN RACES THAT ENGAGE ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES
- 85% OF RESPONDENTS SAID IT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM THAT THE RACE OFFERS 'PROPER RECYCLING AND COMPOSTING STATIONS'
- 80% SAID IT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM THAT THE EVENT ENGAGE PEOPLE WHO WOULDN'T NORMALLY HAVE ACCESS TO OR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE RACE AND/OR SPORT.

- 3) The above conversations are best had in a full-group brainstorm session amongst staff and leadership with a designated facilitator to keep things moving. Even better if the conversation can be guided by some research (e.g. have you ever surveyed runners about how they value and expect social and environmental responsibility from the event?). Sustainability by any definition requires leadership, buy-in from staff, and shared accountability for moving forward.
- Can the group agree to hear what could be considered dissenting thoughts in addition to aspirations and ideas? This is important because when someone questions the value of a certain action or program, it can be a catalyst to look deeper. Once the group has had full opportunity to weigh in, there likely will have emerged new ideas to build on, or there will be an opportunity to say *'forget that, we're going another direction'*.
  - Assess actions according to industry best practices: The Council for Responsible Sport offers a free assessment tool according to its five categories of best practices in 'triple bottom line' sustainability, or, taking economic, social and environmental factors into decision-making side-by-side. [Request the complimentary tool here](#). Any kind of assessment against best practices will show you where you're performing well, and where there is room to improve.

**Take Action! The complimentary 'Where We Stand' Sustainability Assessment tool for events helps identify strong suits and gaps according to existing operations**





## Start Here!

This tool is offered by the Council for Responsible Sport to assist organizers in assessing the viability of a certification bid for a responsible sporting event. It is a complete list of the version 4.2 Responsible Sport Standards for certification, broken into sub-sheets by category. Please note that there are worksheet tabs for each of the five categories. This summary page is linked to counts of the total number of points projected based on entered 'yes', 'maybe' and 'no' responses. These counts should help you see where existing efforts and initiatives can earn your event credit towards certification, as well as identify the extent of efforts that would be needed to earn certification.

## How To Use This Tool

In each of the 5 category sheets, **column A** denotes the credit number, **column B** denotes the credit description and the number of points available for that credit (most are 1, some are 2, or 3). **Fill out columns C,D,E, & F to the best of your knowledge/ability.** Column G shows the number of points available for each credit/standard. Column H details the requirements for achieving points. Return to this summary page to view the results of your estimations and assess whether certification is a viable path for your event. Use your 'maybe' and 'no' columns to identify gaps that will need to be addressed to ensure a successful certification.

**Note:** If certification does not appear to be attainable based on projections, consider contacting us to learn more about Engage-a program designed to help events plan for improvements in their social and environmental programs while creating an organizational path towards certification.

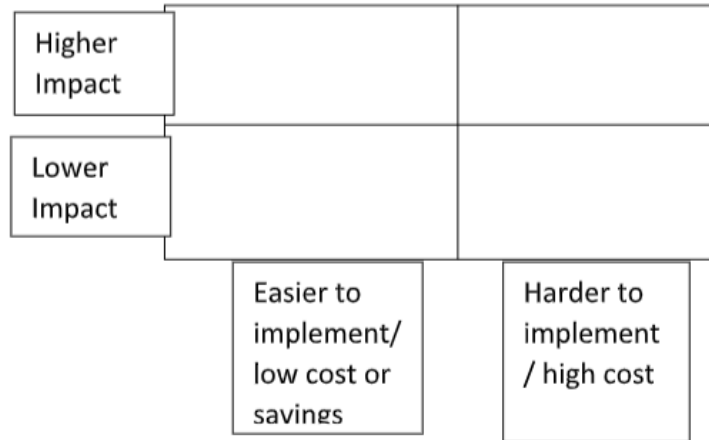
Basic Event Information	
Event Date	
Event Location (City, State, Country)	
Number of Expected Participants	
Number of Expected Spectators	

Workbook Summary		Credit Points				
Section		Available	'Yes'	'Maybe'	'No'	Selected
1	Planning & Communications	11				
2	Procurement	9				
3	Resource Management	28				
4	Access & Equity	7				
5	Community Legacy	6				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>				

**Note:** If the 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe' columns don't add up to 61 (total points available), it is likely that you missed an opportunity where more than one point is available on a single credit (e.g. up to 3 points available for credit 3.14). Read columns G & I carefully to see how many points are available on each credit (row). For example, there may be credit rows where you enter '1' point in the 'yes' column and '2' points in the 'maybe' or 'no' column.

## Step 2: Identify Key Priorities and Challenges

- a. **Identify Changes and Challenges** by figuring out how items and actions identified during the brainstorm would affect or alter current business as usual and to what degree. Acknowledge the level of change that would be required as you prioritize opportunities. One simple way to do that is to plot them on a simple grid (example below) according to your decision-making factor



As you plan, identify roadblocks and challenges and call them out as specifically as possible. *For example:* ‘We would like to measure and offset the greenhouse gas emissions of our operations but the following things present barriers’:

- a. Lack of staff experience/know how to perform the measurements and calculations
- b. GHG Offsets cost \$15-20/ton. Depending on the results of our calculations, there could be significant financial cost associated with purchasing climate neutralizing offsets

**b. Determine willingness and resistance to change.**

- a. Resistance to change is exceedingly common, especially in organizations where things have been done a certain way for a long time. While the adage ‘if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it’ applies, it’s also important to keep the urgency of the need for change at the forefront of conversations with leadership. Societal and environmental forces are compelling the market-based economy to seriously consider whether in business we are willing to do more than *say* we care about more than the bottom line. Are we collectively willing to rise above the bottom line? Our individual and organizational answers to that question are of the utmost importance to the entire notion of ‘sustainable development,’ or not, and the fact is that we ALL have plenty of room to improve.

**c. Strategize**

- a. Maybe you’ve got an all-star team with extra capacity and plenty of money. If so, lucky you. If you’re like the rest of us, all is not lost. But it means you’ll have to be discerning about where and how to focus your efforts. That probably means you can’t do everything you’d really like to, at least not right away. That’s not to say not to be ambitious but **do** be strategic and recognize that things take time.
- b. Create a realistic timeline based on the conversations around priorities and organizational values.

- c. Get creative. Road races have lots of people around. Most of them are creative individuals with unique talents who also would like for their grandkids to live on a planet as beautiful, biodiverse and bountiful as the one we grew up in. Activate sponsorships in new ways (ask all your sponsors what sustainability looks like at their organization!), purchase wisely, look for alternatives to wasteful items, invite your staff and audience to get involved with local sustainability efforts.

#### **Step 4: Implement**

Time to do it. You've identified your priorities and made a plan. I do not pretend to suggest I know the best project management tools and tactics out there. Every organization is different and there are tons of tools that will help you organize your plan into bite-sized tasks on a timeline that works for you.

Also, utilize your Running USA peer network to see what's working at other races. Many of the following list of events that have achieved certification according to a peer-created collection of best practices are also RUSA members.

# Running USA White Paper



## Certified Road Race Events 2008-2018



Evergreen events achieved 90% or more of the total best practices promoted in the standards for responsible sport

- 2018 Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL) *Inspire*
- 2016 Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL)
- 2016 TD Beach to Beacon 10k (Cape Elizabeth, ME)
- 2008 Marin County Triathlon (Marin, CA)



Gold events achieved 75% or more of the total best practices promoted in the standards for responsible sport

- 2018 Bank of America Shamrock Shuffle 8K (Chicago, IL) *Inspire*
- 2018 Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati, OH) *Inspire*
- 2018 Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.) *Inspire*
- 2018 Eugene Marathon (Eugene, OR)
- 2017 California International Marathon (Sacramento, CA)
- 2017 Skechers Performance Los Angeles Marathon (Los Angeles, CA)
- 2017 Chevron Houston Marathon (Houston, TX)
- 2017 Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.) *Inspire*
- 2017 Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati, OH) *Inspire*
- 2016 Bank of America Shamrock Shuffle 8K (Chicago, IL)
- 2016 Eugene Marathon (Eugene, OR)
- 2016 Frescoale Austin Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2016 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon (Toronto, Ontario, Canada)
- 2015 Chevron Houston Marathon (Houston, TX)
- 2015 Scotiabank Vancouver Half Marathon (Vancouver, B.C., Canada)
- 2015 Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.)
- 2015 Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati, OH)
- 2015 Runner's World Half Marathon & Festival (Bethlehem, PA)
- 2014 Eversource Hartford Marathon (Hartford, CT)
- 2014 Waddell & Reed Kansas City Marathon (Kansas City, MO)
- 2014 Akron Marathon (Akron, OH)
- 2014 Runner's World Heartbreak Hill Half Marathon (Boston, MA)
- 2014 Marine Corps Marathon (Arlington, VA)
- 2014 TD Beach to Beacon 10k (Cape Elizabeth, ME)
- 2014 WIN for KC Women's Triathlon (Kansas City, MO)
- 2013 Runner's World Half Marathon & Festival (Bethlehem, PA)
- 2013 Chevron Houston Marathon (Houston, TX)
- 2012 Philadelphia Marathon (Philadelphia, PA)
- 2011 Half Moon Bay International Marathon (Half Moon Bay, CA)
- 2011 Big Sur Half Marathon (Carmel, CA)
- 2010 Big Sur International Marathon (Carmel, CA)
- 2009 Big Sur Half Marathon (Carmel, CA)
- 2009 EDF Energy Birmingham Half Marathon (Birmingham, UK)
- 2008 ING Hartford Marathon (Hartford, CT)



Silver events achieved 60% or more of the total best practices promoted in the standards for responsible sport

- 2017 Cowtown Marathon (Fort Worth, TX)
- 2016 Telcel Mexico City Marathon (Mexico City, Mexico)
- 2016 OUC Orlando Half Marathon & Lake Eola 5K (Orlando, FL)
- 2015 Asics Los Angeles Marathon (Los Angeles, CA)
- 2015 Austin Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2015 3M Half Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-Snowmass (Snowmass, CO)
- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-Atlanta (Atlanta, GA)
- 2014 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon (Toronto, Ontario, Canada)
- 2014 Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL)
- 2014 Gazelle Girl Half Marathon & 5k (Grand Rapids, MI)
- 2014 Bank of America Shamrock Shuffle 8K (Chicago, IL)
- 2013 LIVESTRONG Austin Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2013 Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati, OH)
- 2013 Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.)
- 2013 Scotiabank Vancouver Half Marathon (Vancouver, BC, Canada)
- 2012 Chevron Houston Marathon (Houston, TX)
- 2012 Greenline Half Marathon (Memphis, TN)
- 2012 Runner's World Half Marathon Festival (Bethlehem, PA)
- 2012 TD Beach to Beacon 10K (Cape Elizabeth, ME)
- 2011 Bank of America Shamrock Shuffle 8K (Chicago, IL)
- 2011 LIVESTRONG Austin Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2011 NSKS Run for Food and Shelter (Nashua, NH)
- 2011 Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.)
- 2011 Marine Corps Marathon (Arlington, VA)
- 2011 WIN for KC Women's Triathlon (Kansas City, MO)
- 2010 Deuces Wild Triathlon (Show Low, AZ)
- 2009 NSKS Run for Food and Shelter (Nashua, NH)
- 2009 Marine Corps Marathon (Arlington, VA)
- 2009 Win for KC Women's Triathlon (Kansas City, MO)
- 2008 Freshwater Trust Portland Triathlon (Portland, OR)



Certified events achieved 45% or more of the total best practices promoted in the standards for responsible sport

- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-McDowell Mountain (AZ)
- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-Zion (Zion, UT)
- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-Appalachians (WV)
- 2014 Ragnar Trail Relay-Wail Lake (Wail Lake, CA)
- 2014 Gore-Tex Philadelphia Marathon (Philadelphia, PA)
- 2014 J.P. Morgan Corporate Challenge Chicago (Chicago, IL)
- 2013 Women on the Trails 5K Race Series (Austin, TX)
- 2013 Nike Women's Half Marathon (Washington, D.C.)
- 2013 Ragnar Trail Relay-Zion (Zion, UT)
- 2013 Bollemaker 5K Road Race (Lisica, NY)
- 2013 Cincinnati Zoo Cheetah Run (Cincinnati, OH)
- 2012 Turkey Chase (Bethesda, MD)
- 2012 Akron Marathon (Akron, OH)
- 2012 Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL)
- 2012 Nike Women's Marathon (San Francisco, CA)
- 2012 Life Time Triathlon (Chicago, IL)
- 2011 Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati, OH)
- 2011 Portland Triathlon (Portland, OR)
- 2011 Williams Route 66 Marathon (Tulsa, OK)
- 2011 AJC Peachtree Road Race (Atlanta, GA)
- 2010 Ilac Bloomsday Run (Spokane, WA)
- 2010 Bank of America Chicago Marathon (Chicago, IL)
- 2010 MCM Historic Half Marathon (Arlington, VA)
- 2010 Lumko's Swim and Triathlon (Bivings, MD)
- 2010 Nike Women's Marathon (San Francisco, CA)
- 2010 Richard S. Calliguir City of Pittsburgh Great Race (Pittsburgh, PA)
- 2009 InNona (Mnnetonka, MN)
- 2009 Austin Marathon (Austin, TX)
- 2009 Under Armour Baltimore Running Festival (Baltimore, MD)
- 2009 Port Perry Half Marathon (Prince Albert, Ontario, Canada)
- 2009 Honda Los Angeles Marathon (Los Angeles, CA)
- 2008 Keuka Lake Triathlon (Keuka Park, NY)
- 2008 Musselman Triathlon (Geneva, NY)
- 2008 Deschutes Dash (Bend, OR)
- 2008 Nike Women's Marathon (San Francisco, CA)
- 2008 Haulin' Aspen (Bend, OR)
- 2008 The Zone Urban Epic (Portland, ME)



## Conclusion

I've heard people refer to sustainability as if it were something extra (in addition to) their 'normal' work. This often translates to the notion that taking time to think about it will be 'more work' which can create resentment. What if instead, each of us, in all our various roles, were to hold ourselves and each other accountable for identifying the aspects of our work that have impacts and taking personal initiative to measure and mitigate them as part of our responsibility to our organizations, their reputations, and our one shared planet?

That type of integrative approach would transform the road race industry. It's already happening at many events where organizers are challenging themselves to be more vocal with their sponsors, vendors and other stakeholders about their values, and whether they're willing to perhaps pay a little more for a product or service that reduces or mitigates impacts.

Improving sustainable performance of events requires creativity. What if you could turn areas where you feel your event currently is just getting by, or even underperforming into an opportunity for a net positive impact either socially, environmentally, or economically for the bottom line? Luckily for our sector, event professionals are almost always both resourceful and inventive.

Finally, I've attempted to share more of the 'how' than the 'what' of sustainability at events here, because it really does span a wide range. But that said, from my vantage point of watching who's doing what, I'll mention one best practice I think is a no-brainer for events that truly want to be part of the solution considering the often-inevitable necessity of fossil-fueled travel by droves of people to and from events and the short window of time we have to seriously address climate changing emissions in all sectors of the economy. The way the **Flying Pig Marathon (Cincinnati)** and the **Credit Union Cherry Blossom Ten Mile Run (Washington, D.C.)** have begun inviting their participants to chip in a few extra bucks to offset the climate impacts of their travel to and from the event through the purchase of climate emissions offsets is very encouraging. Until we have eliminated those emissions at their sources, supporting the transition to cleaner energy by offsetting them is crucial. It's an emerging trend I hope will catch on to become a new norm because it simultaneously helps organizers fund their enhanced sustainability efforts and compliments the values of the participant by inviting them a simple way to claim accountability for the environmental impacts of their actions.

## About the Council for Responsible Sport

The Council's vision is a world where responsibly produced sports events are the norm and its mission is to support, certify, and celebrate the efforts of event organizers working to make a difference in their communities. The current version of the Council's Certification standards (v.4.2) was developed by an outside working group of both sustainability and sport industry experts. A total 101 events have earned official certification since the Council's founding in 2008, 75 of them according to the version 4.2 Standards for Responsible Sport. See a full list of certified events, download the certification standards, and stay in the loop about the Sport for Climate Action Initiative (#getoffthesidelines) at [www.CouncilforResponsibleSport.org](http://www.CouncilforResponsibleSport.org)