

British Sugar TOPSOIL

Sustainable from the beginning

British Sugar TOPSOIL, a division of British Sugar plc and subsidiary of Associated British Foods, was formed over 25 years ago, developing a range of topsoil products from the soil washed from the beet as part of the sugar production process. What started as a response to a change in waste legislation has resulted in environmental and sustainable practices being at the heart of British Sugar plc.

Landscape News met with Andy Spetch, National TOPSOIL Manager and an agronomist to find out more about the company's sustainability agenda and how this has become one of the core values of the business.

British Sugar has been producing sugar from sugar beet for over 100 years. When new waste legislation was introduced, the company needed to find a different solution to its waste management requirements.

AS: We originally used to distribute the waste soil across the site as well as return a portion to the agricultural land. The new legislation prevented us from continuing this practice so, as a wider business, a review was taken across all the business streams to identify what products could be developed from what was considered waste. And so the TOPSOIL division was created.

At the same time that British Sugar TOPSOIL was formed, so too were several additional divisions, all created to deal with the waste from the production process of the core product - sugar.

So, how has what started out as a legal and commercial decision to create new divisions within the organisation, moved to the core focus being environmental and sustainable solutions?

AS: We were exceptionally lucky. We had a director - Carl Carter - who was a man ahead of his time. From the outset he could see the opportunities from the waste we created, both from a commercial and a sustainability viewpoint. One example was to use the excess heat generated from the sugar process to heat 30 hectares of greenhouses and grow tomatoes. I remember Carl saying 'we have to become a sustainable business' - this was his vision.

British Sugar has developed numerous by-products from the waste created by its core business - topsoil from the cleaning stage, animal feed from the pulp, Limex from the purification stage, heat from evaporation supporting greenhouse plant growth, bioethanol from the fermentation and distillation stage to fuel vehicles, and Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plants, making the sites completely self-sufficient.

AS: We have come a long way in the last 25 years and continue to try and improve. Water usage across the whole process has reduced, mainly through agronomy practice and the soil type the sugar beet is grown in - developing the best 'recipe' for sandy clay loam soil to hold the water better. Irrigation practices have also improved, using more managed irrigation solutions. On our sites, we have reduced water usage by 26% since 2014, through reusing and repurposing the water from our lagoons, increasing on-site water storage, and putting water back to the local rivers.

Across this same time period, energy usage has reduced by 12.3% and CO₂ emissions by 17.8%.

AS: By refining our processes we've been able to bring both water and energy usage down, which not only benefits our environment but also ensures the commercial viability of the changes we've made to achieve this - we are a business after all! But this doesn't detract from the environmental and sustainability impact. We have been working with the Carbon Trust for the past 10 years, focusing on the whole life carbon footprint of our operations. Our parent company British Sugar has a dedicated Environmental Manager whose sole purpose is to ensure we operate to environmental best practice across all the business streams.

Cementing its commitment, British Sugar plc has most recently signed up to the Science Based Targets (SBI) initiative. By 2030 it commits to reducing its carbon footprint and water usage by 30%, and ensuring all plastic packaging is reusable, recyclable, biodegradable or compostable.

For more information visit britishsugar.co.uk/sustainability/our-approach/

Call out quote from Andy:

The terms 'sustainability' and 'environmental' are banded about a lot but not always backed up by actions. At British Sugar we can evidence everything we do and the processes we've implemented across the whole business are there for anyone to see.