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'Outside the box' saves money

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OAKLAND — Giving new meaning to the phrase "thinking outside the box," local companies are using renewable packaging to transport goods ranging from chocolate bars to newspapers, said participants in a "Choose Renewables" conference here Thursday.

One of the biggest ways a company can save money and spare the environment is by using reusable containers such as plastic tubs. This is because conventional packaging such as cardboard boxes gets dirty, breaks down and has to be replaced, costing companies money both to get it to the landfill and to buy new boxes.

"It's here that sustainability is given a voice, a purpose and a fighting chance," said Margo Reid Brown, keynote speaker and chair of the California Integrated Waste Management Board, of the two-day conference that began Wednesday.

The event brought together representatives of companies interested in reusable packaging, including Pleasanton-based Safeway and San Leandro-based Ghirardelli Chocolate Co., and companies that supply such packaging, like Rehrig Pacific Co., a Los Angeles plastic container manufacturer.

"If you've ever seen a milk crate, it's likely we made it," said Jon Kalin, sales manager for the 80-year-old company. "We're here to help facilitate the transition," Kalin said.

A group of about 100 listened to presentations, networked and enjoyed the breeze sweeping in from the Oakland Marina in a meeting room.

"It's a win-win proposition. There is no

adversarial relationship between economic performance and sustainability," said speaker Rory Bakke, director of business programs for Oakland-based StopWaste.org. Her organization helps local companies eliminate waste and high costs from inefficient packaging, supplying money and technical support.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that changing from traditional, wasteful practices can be slow-moving.

"Is there a snowball effect among corporations turning green to black?" an audience member asked keynote speaker Brown.

"If there is, it's on the bunny slopes," the speaker said.

Brown pointed out, however, that "giants like Wal-Mart" have been able to affect their manufacturers' packaging, also lauding Ford, Caterpillar and Toyota vehicle companies for their use of reusables.

Examples of reusable packaging are plastic handheld containers, tubs and pallets, Bakke said in an interview.

Surprisingly, standard wooden pallets can be problematic, because wooden pallets often don't last very long and end up going into the landfill, Bakke said.

"The Quaker Tropicana Gatorade plant in Oakland has switched to plastic reusable containers," Bakke said. The plant is now part of the Pepsico family.

"Some of our customers have saved more than 30 percent of their annual packaging costs," said Andy DeWitt, director of new business development at Tosca Limited, a Wisconsin company that partners with customers to service and manage returnable containers.

The 50-year-old Tosca virtually converted the Savoy, or curly-leafed, spinach market from wooden bushel baskets to custom-designed, 16" x 24" plastic packages and claims to have delivered cost savings to the industry of 35 percent to 37 percent annually since the 1990s.

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Margo Reid Brown, Chair of the California Integrated Waste Management Board was the keynote...

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On the local level, San Leandro-based Ghirardelli Chocolate Co. is keeping 350 tons of cardboard out of the landfill annually by switching from cardboard boxes to hand-carried, open grey tubs known as totes.

In the past, it cost Ghirardelli \$520,000 a year to buy 580,000 cardboard boxes annually for carrying its premium chocolate squares from the San Leandro factory to its packagers. The boxes would get soiled with use and were thrown in the trash, resulting in an additional \$2,700 a year for disposal. Also, the boxes would crumple when stacked, squashing the chocolate inside.

Ghirardelli worked with StopWaste, which did a cost-benefit analysis and gave Ghirardelli a \$75,000 Business Waste Prevention Fund Award to help purchase the totes. The company switched to the totes in 2005 and expects to save \$2 million over the next five years with the new packaging.

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