

## COMPANIES

# Geothermal heating, more among sustainability efforts at Masters Gallery Foods in Oostburg

*Masters Gallery Foods released its first Sustainability and ESG report last year.*



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OOSTBURG – Masters Gallery Foods has made strides in sustainable business operations during a time when more consumers are pushing for environmentally conscious practices and supporting companies that implement changes.

The cheese packager and distributor was the only Sheboygan County-based company among nearly 60 in the Wisconsin Sustainable Business Council's 2024 Green Masters Program, an online tool that helps businesses identify, measure and improve areas of sustainability applicable to their operations. Masters Gallery Foods also holds the highest designation of Green Master.

“It simplifies sustainability in a way that a lot of other programs don't,” Julia Steffes, sustainability manager at Masters Gallery Foods, said of the program.

Green Masters Program topics include environment, society, workforce, and government and leadership. Each topic has more detailed tasks, like greenhouse gas and waste management under the environment umbrella.

Grown out of a program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that started about 15 years ago, the online self-certification program launched a new iteration two years ago. WSBC requires businesses to sign a verification statement they answered honestly in their reporting, and they're scored on priority areas. Companies can become a WSBC member or pay to access the program.

“Sustainability is kind of a big topic,” said Jessy Servi Ortiz, managing director of the Wisconsin Sustainable Business Council. “It touches a lot of areas of a business, and it can be really overwhelming. The Green Masters Program really helps them (businesses) scale it to be meaningful to their organization.”

Ortiz said waste reduction used to be the entry point into sustainability improvements. Now, she said, it’s reducing greenhouse gas emissions, one reason being larger publicly traded companies are requiring disclosure from partners along the supply chain.

“It’s one of those metrics that people are looking for,” Ortiz said.

Masters Gallery Foods, which has been a Green Masters Program participant since 2016, first focused its sustainability initiatives — like energy efficiency, greenhouse gas management, and health and safety — on facilities and operations improvements at the Oostburg facility and retrofitting parts of the Plymouth facility, both about 300,000 square feet.

Upgrades include installing LED and motion-activated lighting, eliminating the use of ammonia and other regulated coolants with a chilling tower in Oostburg, and utilizing a geothermal pond as a renewable energy source to heat and cool roughly 15% of the building. The pond, full of fish and native plants, also serves as a biodiverse habitat.

Additionally, Masters uses an electric Orange EV truck to move trailers around the Oostburg campus, which reduces the fleet’s diesel fuel usage by more than 2,000 gallons a year. Both sites also have onsite nitrogen generation systems for food packaging, which eliminates the need of the gas to be trucked in.

Sustainability is seen in smaller details at the Oostburg facility, too, like reducing food waste by turning blocked cheese that doesn’t meet production line standards into shredded cheese and eliminating chemical cleaner by using a Tennant EC2 floor scrubber. Through electricity and water’s atomic charge, the scrubber attracts and picks up dirt.

Looking forward, Steffes said Masters is looking at its broader environmental impact, moving from individual projects to a holistic scope, like calculating its greenhouse gas emissions and engaging partners along the supply chain. Specifically, she said this could include monitoring energy usage by production line and encouraging suppliers to collect and supply GHG data.

“The further down your sustainability journey you get, the more you try to do,” she said. “You’re going to invest a lot of time and effort into some of these projects, but in the long run, you’re going to see a lot of return.”

Ortiz said being more sustainable makes “business sense.” There are opportunities to reduce operating costs, like electricity consumption, and attract new customers interested in sustainably conscious companies.

Tim Yaeger, facilities superintendent with Masters Gallery Foods, said he’s seen a bigger demand from customers that the company follow various sustainable practices.

**Local company works to decrease waste:** Plastics can take hundreds of years to break down. This Wisconsin company's biodegradable film aims to change that.

## **Masters Gallery publishes first company Sustainability and ESG report**

Yaeger said sustainability has grown as a priority in the industry since he joined the company in 2010. He said the push for sustainable practices came from company President & CEO Jeff Gentine. Now, sustainability is a company core principle.

Masters Gallery Foods released its first Sustainability and ESG report last year, disclosing and measuring ways it’s addressing environmental, social and governance priorities within the company.

“Sustainability is not just about minimizing our environmental footprint,” Gentine said in the report. “It is also about creating a lasting impact on the communities we serve, fostering innovation and ensuring the well-being of future generations.”

Among sustainability highlights, Masters was recognized with the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce’s Business Friend of the Environment award, aligned itself with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and shared sustainability goals and benchmarks. Some include tracking and reducing carbon within the supply chain and reducing waste. The company has already diverted 84% of landfill-bound waste.

“We’ve been doing a lot of good work for quite a bit of time, and we just really haven’t shared a lot of our successes,” Steffes said.

Masters Gallery Foods is navigating an unknown terrain, as privately held businesses are not required to conduct ESG reporting. Steffes said the company is guided by industry needs and customer requests. As a member of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy Sustainability Alliance, she said Masters is also learning with other stakeholders in the dairy industry.

“You're seeing a big push, especially in the dairy industry, to do some of the sustainability work,” she said. “So, when we do engage with our suppliers, a lot of people are already doing the work, and they're in the same boat as we are trying to quantify their impact.”

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