Emerging as a national leader for providing environmentally responsible healthcare, Catholic Healthcare West, CHW, the largest not-for-profit health care system in the western United States, is a 2002 recipient of Hospitals for a Healthy Environment’s Champions for Change Award. In 1996, Catholic Healthcare West became the first health care system to endorse the principles of the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), an effort joining investor, environmental, and advocacy groups to promote a sustainable future. In endorsing the principles of the CERES agreement, CHW embarked on environmental practices of waste reduction, recycling, and Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) that have become an integral part of its operation in promoting healthy communities.

The CERES agreement calls for its member institutions to adopt policies that will protect the biosphere, use natural resources in a sustainable manner, reduce and properly dispose of wastes, conserve energy, reduce risks at facilities, and use safe products and services. Additionally, members are called to restore the environment when necessary, inform the public of risks posed by institution activities, provide annual reports and audits, and sustain a management commitment.

To ensure adherence to CERES goals, each hospital in the CHW system created an Environmental Action Committee (EAC) to coordinate hospital wide environmental policies and oversee comprehensive environmental health and safety programs. EACs also determine the effectiveness of implemented programs through monitoring and tracking. In addition to adopting CHW’s system wide environmental initiatives, these committees institute innovative programs at the individual hospital level.

In an effort to protect the biosphere, CHW is taking steps to stop harmful gas emissions. Facilities installed modernized chillers and boilers and replaced older model ETO sterilizers with either units that substitute HCFCs for CFCs or those that do not require a propellant. Of the few ETO sterilizers still remaining all are now modified to capture 99% of ODC leakage, which is then recycled. Taking a leadership role in CHW’s development of cleaner fuels, Marion Medical Center is pioneering research on a methane fuel system. Additionally, many of the hospitals within CHW reduced fuel emissions through formal car-pool programs, public transportation subsidies for employees, and agreements with vendors that result in reduced trips and vehicular mileage.
Many CHW hospitals recently adopted a mopless cleaning system. Not only does this reduce the amount of chemicals required for cleansing, it also reduces the volume of water used. This more efficient allocation of natural resources saves the hospitals (amount of money). Mercy Medical Center designed a unique program of recycling its cooling water to support a hospital created wetlands, which improves the health of migrating waterfowl and serves as a therapeutic walking ground for the Center’s patients.

One of the focal points of CHW’s environmental program is its commitment to reducing wastes through both recycling and other waste reduction initiatives. In addition to the use of a system wide recycling program on all recyclable materials, including medical, industrial, and hazardous waste recycling, and a reuse program on items from surgical tool wraps to Styrofoam, CHW uses a quarterly reporting tool to achieve goals of reducing solid waste disposal by 10%, medical waste disposal by 20%, and increase recycling by 10% (timeframe??). Individual hospitals must report their waste disposal each quarter and seek to reduce it and achieve CHW goals through various means. For example, St. Mary’s Medical Center in San Francisco reduced hazardous waste by 90% (timeframe?) by changing processes (details?) and identifying non-hazardous substitutes for previously used chemicals (such as?). By recycling 167 tons of waste, the San Joaquin Region reduced its solid waste volume by 13%. CHW also achieved waste reduction success through improved packaging, including sending multiple shipments in one container as is done at St. Vincent’s Medical Center and by requiring vendors to reuse pallets for deliver at St. Francis Memorial Hospital of San Francisco.

Other hospitals report various successes as well. Since 2001, Dominican Hospital’s Blue Sterile Wrap Recovery Program collected and sent over 9000 lbs of Blue Sterile Wrap and other plastics to Marathon Recovery, a plastic collection firm. Marathon Recovery then melts the plastic and uses it as glue for an urban wood/plastic composite building material. Marion Medical Center began a Greenwaste Recycling program for its community. MMC sends waste for composting and then farmers use it in agricultural fields, resulting in less need for water, fertilizers and pesticides. In the past year, the hospital diverted 25,500 lbs. of greenwaste from the landfill and sent it for composting. A waste segregation training program at Dominican Hospital Santa Cruz lead to a reduction in medical waste from 3 lbs. per patient adjusted day to just 1.35 lbs. Since its implementation in (date) the program diverted 300,000 lbs. of
medical waste from the disposal stream and achieved $130,000 in savings. Finally, to ensure usable materials are not wasted, CHW sends excess medical equipment to developing countries.

Conservation of energy is a CERES principle from which several CHW hospitals benefit. St. John’s Regional Medical Center reduced its energy consumption by 8% (over what period) through a lighting upgrade program that replaced existing ballasts with energy efficient ballasts and lamps. Seton Medical Center performed a similar upgrade and realized $36,000 in savings related to reduced consumption.

To reduce risks to both employees and the community at large, CHW conducts Employee Education Programs. Newsletters, bulletin boards, staff meetings, and safety fairs educate employees on healthcare related environmental issues and hospital policies and programs. Such education safeguards the health of employees and encourages them to use their knowledge to correct environmental deficiencies for the benefit of the community.

Another strength of CHW’s environmental program is its recognition of the importance of utilizing safe and environmentally preferable products. This past year Catholic Healthcare West issued environmental purchasing guidelines in pursuit of three goals: to reduce waste at its source by reducing the amount of virgin materials purchased, to purchase goods with recycled content that can be recycled again, and at the end of initial use focus on recycling, reuse within the hospital or elsewhere, and proper disposal. As part of its Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) efforts, CHW established Value Analysis Committees at the corporate and local levels to analyze products and make purchasing decisions. Furthermore, CHW entered a contract agreeing that medical supplier Premier will provide over 60% of its purchasing needs. CHW informed Premier of its commitment to the environment and its desire to purchase environmentally friendly materials. The hospital system is also nearly 100% mercury free and committed to purchase mercury free products unless no viable alternative is available. Furthermore, CHW often participates in conferences to continually share and gain knowledge of EPP. The continuous and visible drive to improve their environmental performance and share their vision with others sets CHW apart as a national leader.

Using the CERES principles, Catholic Healthcare West developed an effective plan to protect the environment and improve the health of its communities. Through a combination of system wide policies instituting required programs and innovative programs developed at the hospital level, CHW proves it is
possible for a health system to use waste reduction, recycling, and purchasing decisions to provide environmentally sound health care.