

# Unilever – Improving water efficiency in manufacturing

August 24, 2017

## WE MEAN BUSINESS COALITION AND BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR WATER AND CLIMATE



**HEADQUARTERED IN ROTTERDAM, UNILEVER IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING FAST-MOVING CONSUMER GOODS COMPANIES. ITS PRODUCTS ARE SOLD IN MORE THAN 190 COUNTRIES AND USED BY TWO BILLION CONSUMERS WORLDWIDE EVERY DAY.**

Unilever's strategy is to reduce water use and increase reuse wherever possible, with a focus on new operations and water-scarce areas. All sites across the business must produce plans for reducing water use and manufacturing sites are actively monitored. Unilever also encourages proposals to improve water efficiency, having allocated nearly US\$10million since 2014 for over 100 projects.

### PROGRAM RATIONALE

Water reuse and closed loop systems offer Unilever an opportunity to minimize their manufacturing water use and the impact on watersheds as the business grows. Unilever focuses on water-scarce sites and also on new factories being built.

### PROGRAM APPROACH

Each site across Unilever's business worldwide must produce its own plan for reducing water use. Within manufacturing sites, Unilever is driving an ambitious eco efficiency plan. To monitor progress, they collect utility cost data via their Environmental Performance Reporting system for each manufacturing site.

In addition to this, in 2014 Unilever established a US\$4.5 million ring fenced water fund to drive water efficiency in manufacturing operations. Financial criteria for water efficiency projects in water scarce areas were also relaxed.

### PROGRAM RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- ▶ Results from the program at Unilever include:
- ▶ A 5% reduction in water abstraction per ton of production compared with 2014
- ▶ A 37% reduction of total water per ton of production compared to 2008
- ▶ In 2015, the absolute quantity of water abstracted by Unilever manufacturing sites decreased by approximately 6.8% compared to the previous year
- ▶ Cumulative cost avoidance through reducing water use in factories of around €60 million since 2008
- ▶ 2016 funding was allocated to 71 projects, which are expected to generate 1.14 million m<sup>3</sup> of water savings per year, and over €3.1 million in cost savings
- ▶ Projects have an average payback of less than two years and range from low and no cost behaviour changes to large initiatives such as installation of water recycling centres

## LESSONS LEARNED

The biggest opportunities lie where water savings also represent energy, waste and chemical savings. For example, the Powders Plant in Brazil becoming a zero-liquid discharge site has not only reduced costs by US\$33,000 per year but also represents reductions in energy used for abstraction and wastewater treatment.

---

“*We have made significant reductions in the water used in manufacturing. However, the biggest impact comes from water used by consumers when they shower, bathe and clean with our products.*”

---

## WHAT NEXT?

Looking forward to 2020, Unilever intends to continue working hard to maintain levels of success achieved to date. One target in particular, to halve the water associated with consumer use of Unilever products, requires renewed enthusiasm (in 2016 water impact per consumer decreased just 7% on 2010 levels).

[Find out more about Unilever's water efficiency program >](#)

***This case study was created in collaboration with the Business Alliance for Water and Climate, for more information visit [BAFWAC.org](http://BAFWAC.org).***