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Earthwise Environmental: Leading Water Conservation Technologies

Sixteen years ago, the market wasn't quite ready for Robert Miller's business plan. Today, his eco-friendly water management company helps clients save millions of dollars and millions of gallons of water every year.

Commercial and public facilities often suffer from a kind of “chemical dependency” when it comes to managing and treating their fresh water supply, ensuring a safe and abundant resource for the millions of people they serve annually.

Bob Miller's years of working in the water management and treatment industry gave him the know-how to provide such systems. But he also knew there should be a better, smarter and more sustainable way.

“I thought there was an opportunity to provide a more environmentally friendly solution to what we did,” he says. He was so sure that in 1995, Miller took a leap of business faith and founded Bensenville, Ill.-based Earthwise Environmental.

Today, the company is the recognized leader in providing sustainable solutions for the treatment and management of commercial and industrial water systems. Problem was back then, most people were quite happy with their chemicals and at first, it was slow going.

“There wasn't a lot of concern about being environmentally friendly in the mid-90s,” Miller says. “We pretty much became a chemical provider trying to do things in a more environmentally friendly way.”

Flash-forward to today with water supply shortfalls predicted in the next 10 years and Earthwise Environmental's services in high demand. Today's water management programs are increasingly focused on chemical minimization, and water reclamation and reuse, Miller says. But that focus continues to face some uphill climbs.

“We’ve been an industry used to buying large amounts of chemicals, and the chemical industry has done a nice job of selling them, providing large containment tanks to hold and store all this chemistry,” says Miller, who competes with the big guys to demonstrate that chemicals are not the be-all-and-end-all to conservation and safety.

“It’s a ton of education,” he says, adding that he always has his teaching cap on, which leads to success stories like that found at a massive Chicago downtown teaching hospital – a facility that must ensure safe, available water 365 days a year, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

The project, which will show payback in less than two years, eliminates energy-wasting technical processes and safely reclaims almost nine million gallons of water. Of the current 164 million gallons of water the facility uses annually, Earthwise will help save about 20 million. Saving water is a key for Miller.

“Knowing we are helping conserve a precious resource and teaching clients a new way to look at the water and energy they use means a lot to me,” he says.

Another passion: preventing waterborne disease such as Legionnaires, a form of pneumonia that can develop when a person inhales water mist contaminated with the bacteria. Nearly always preventable, Legionnaires afflicts an estimated 10,000 to 50,000 people a year (it often goes undetected), and can be deadly, especially for those with compromised immune systems.

While larger hospitals have the resources to take proactive measures against Legionnaires, smaller hospitals and nursing homes are “scared to death” about what to do if they find it, Miller says. Earthwise Environmental supervises the water treatment system at the Chicago facility, using an ion exchange technology that kills Legionella and other bacteria to combat the spread of disease.

Nearby, the 426,000-square-foot Robert H. Lurie Medical Research building may also benefit from water conservation technologies thanks to Miller’s daughter Emily, an environmental science major at Northwestern University, and Kimberly Gray, M.D., chair of the environmental science department. Reading publications and case studies provides great background for students, but Miller thought they could benefit from real-world application.

“The students received course credit and actually presented their findings, which could potentially save millions of gallons of water used in the building,” Miller says. It also showed that implementing new conservation technologies will save \$39,000 a year.

“It was amazing to see how smart the students were, yet they had never really been exposed to a real world example,” he says. The project is being considered for implementation and funding.

As a once reluctant industry begins to embrace conservation and water management technologies, Earthwise Environmental is growing, adding three professionals to its staff in the past year. Much of the company’s growth can be attributed to the relationships Miller has built during his career.

“Many of my clients have been with me since the late ’80s,” he says. “It’s fun to see clients’ families and mine now after 25 years, with kids going to college. We usually have a good laugh at how old we are getting and wonder how we ever did business without computers and cell phones.”

Keeping up with technology is Miller’s legacy.

“Clients like our approach to solving problems, saving water and reducing chemicals,” he says. “They look to us for the ‘what’s next’ idea.”

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Earthwise Environmental Inc.™ provides environmentally-sound water management options to clients including hospitals, schools, hotels, food processing plants, light industrial and commercial buildings. The company offers proactive programs designed to reduce water consumption while helping clients understand the real energy impact of poorly managed water programs and the potential for energy savings. Earthwise also provides programs that manage and prevent waterborne diseases and is an established leader in the field of proactive control and education to prevent Legionnaires’ disease created by the waterborne Legionella organism. Earthwise recommendations for Legionnaires’ disease prevention exceed new industry standards set by ASHRAE. Chicago-area clients include Northwestern Memorial Hospitals, University of Chicago Hospitals, Soldier Field Stadium and Hamilton Partners’ entire portfolio of commercial office buildings. For more about Earthwise Environmental, visit the company online at www.EarthwiseEnvironmental.com.

Attention Editors: Bob Miller, founder and president of Bensenville, Ill.-based Earthwise Environmental Inc., is available for interviews on a wide variety of water management topics. To arrange an interview, contact Sue Markgraf, GreenMark Public Relations, at 847-970-9160 or smarkgraf@greenmarkpr.com.