



Going green just good business in S.A.

Web Posted: 03/29/2008 09:00 AM CDT

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When it comes to green energy, most people think first of the glamour twins: solar power and wind-generated electricity.

But Temple "Scooter" Mangold of SeaWorld San Antonio likes these solutions better: reclaimed water and better toilets.

"Everybody talks about going green, but they think about the most expensive technology out there," Mangold said. "They just think of what has the 'wow' factor."

SeaWorld, along with thousands of other local businesses, has cut its energy use significantly and aided the bottom line by putting low-tech, mostly low-cost methods into place. Many businesses have cut water usage at the prompting of San Antonio Water System, while others have gotten greener by boosting recycling, compacting waste and saving electricity by replacing incandescent lights with compact fluorescent light bulbs.

Most business managers interviewed for this story declined to provide dollar amounts in savings, but all say saving water and energy has made a big difference. And businesses say it's a popular move with customers, too.

A key program began in 1998, when city council approved a measure that allowed SAWS to levy a fee on commercial water users. The fee pays for energy-saving measures, including water-saving appliances — such as toilets — that it provides free to businesses.

SAWS has given rebates amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars for some of the biggest industrial water-users to just a few hundred dollars to smaller businesses, director of conservation Karen Guz said. "A lot of people think the focus on energy-saving is aimed at residential users, but commercial users are a big part of it, too."

Saving water is one way "a lot of businesses see as a way they can separate themselves from the competition — that they are green," SAWS spokeswoman Anne Hayden said.

At SeaWorld a few years ago, Mangold, director of general services, noticed on a hot, humid day that so much water was draining from one of the park's 35-ton air-conditioning units that he could wash his hands in it.

Now, SeaWorld has an aggressive program to collect condensed water. It reaps 167 gallons an hour on humid days that it uses to water flowers and to fill the park's fountains. "In periods of drought, this has really helped us," SeaWorld spokeswoman Fran Stephenson said.

SeaWorld, through various conservation methods, is saving almost 30 million gallons of water a year, SAWS officials say. And the park's water and energy bills are headed down, not up.

"Our energy consumption has declined every year, despite huge new rides being added every year," Mangold said.

Then there are SeaWorld's 309 toilets that SAWS gave the park. SAWS' Guz said the Australian-made toilet "is the best conservation product in the world."

The utility frowns on calling the toilets low-flow, saying that doesn't accurately describe what they do. The toilets have two buttons on the top of the tank. The user presses one button for liquid waste, the other for solid waste. Some businesses have little tent cards atop the toilets telling users what the two buttons do.

The water savings are significant.

A year ago, the Hilton Palacio del Rio hotel partnered with SAWS to install the dual-flush toilets, along with low-flow showerheads and aerators, devices that reduce the flow coming out of faucets, said Russell Hendricks, the Hilton's director of property operations.

In early June, the hotel started tracking its water usage and found it has saved more than 5 million gallons over its 2006 consumption, a dollar savings of about \$25,000 over seven months, Hendricks said.

The Hilton, which was built for HemisFair in 1968, also took other steps, installing an energy-efficient roof that is keeping the hotel's upper floors noticeably cooler. The roofing material, made of white, vinyl-coated material, originally was designed to line acid-holding vessels at petrochemical plants. "Then the developer realized he could sell it for roofing material," Hendricks said.

The new roof was the least expensive alternative, Hendricks said, because "we could take the stuff up through stairwells instead of putting a crane on the street."

More than 2,000 of San Antonio's 3,000 restaurants that use SAWS water also have taken energy-saving measures. With the cooperation of the San Antonio Restaurant Association, SAWS has installed high-efficiency toilets, water-saving faucets and special valves in hoses restaurants use to rinse dishes before they go into a dishwasher.

Frontier Enterprises, owner of 15 Jim's restaurants in San Antonio, has outfitted four units with SAWS-approved water-saving devices, including the spray valves on nozzles used to pre-rinse dishes before they go into a dishwasher, along with high-efficiency toilets.

"We've probably had a 30 to 40 percent reduction in water usage" at the four restaurants, Frontier's director of operations Gary Johnson said. "Just the water we save with the toilets is huge — probably 50,000 gallons a year per toilet."

Each Jim's unit handles 600 to 1,200 customers a day, "and everybody goes to the restroom," Johnson said. And the new valve on pre-rinse hoses is saving each Jim's 60,000 to 70,000 gallons a year, he said.

The San Antonio Restaurant Association has embraced the changes because "our margins are low to begin with in the industry, so anything we can do to help save ourselves money, we want to endorse,"

said Johnson, who is president of the San Antonio Restaurant Association.

SAWS also gave dual-flush toilets and showerheads to the 397-room Holiday Inn Select-San Antonio International Airport, but that's now only part of a broader program general manager Scott Larsen has put in place. About two years ago, the Holiday Inn put recycling bins on each floor and asked guests if they would help recycle. The response was good. More recently, the hotel put recycling bins in each room and on each floor with a note explaining what guests can recycle.

"Now I'm getting notes and comments from people saying, 'Hey, thanks — you're going in the right direction,'" Larsen said. "It would blow your mind as to how much we had been throwing away," Larsen said. He estimates the hotel will save 27,000 pounds that it ordinarily would send to the landfill each year.

And Larsen is another who gives a rave review to the dual-button toilets. "It may be kind of funny to be talking about this, but my guests think they're fantastic. Give people the option to conserve and they will."

It took two years, but Larsen found Vista Fibers, a company that installed a huge recycling bin that accepts a broad range of materials, including paper, most plastics, glass and tin cans.

Vista Fibers separates the material, which doesn't go into a landfill and can be reused, Larsen said. Using this new process, the hotel recycled 10.8 tons of material in the first seven weeks vs. the 21 tons it recycled in all of 2007. The hotel will save money because in the past it paid to have waste hauled away, Larsen said.

Soon, Larsen plans to turn the Holiday Inn's rooftop space into a flower and herb garden; the herbs will be used on dishes prepared by the hotel's two restaurants. He figures his landscaping crew can take care of the herb and flowerbeds.

"When guests on higher floors look down, instead of seeing a concrete roof, they'll see a nice, planted area," Larsen said.

Factory floors, too, are making energy-savings changes.

At the Frito Lay plant in San Antonio, technical manager Dave Self said SAWS has helped the plant reduce operating costs, "and that makes it more economical to produce more pounds at this plant. We try to minimize waste because that costs us money."

The plant's emphasis is on reducing the factory's emissions by capturing "waste heat," or hot air. The hot air that once was vented to the atmosphere from its stacks now is captured and used to heat the oil it uses to fry or to toast its products, which includes Doritos, Cheetos and Lay's chips.

"Instead of taking 70-degree ambient air, we're using much hotter air — and that means using less energy," Self said.

Frito Lay sells its waste — what's left over after it uses potatoes and corn for its products — to cattle farms. It also recycles a dry starch that it extracts from potatoes and sells that, too.

As it has reduced waste, the plant also has used less water for processing and cleaning up. The factory has reduced its total water consumption from 2 gallons per pound of product to less than 1 gallon.

"It's the right move for San Antonio and the aquifer," Self said, "and it's a good business play, too."

Like the San Antonio Restaurant Association, the San Antonio Manufacturers Association has embraced energy-saving methods, SAWS' Guz said.

"Long term, businesses want San Antonio to have reasonably priced water," SAWS' Guz said. "If we can keep costs low, every commercial entity benefits."

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