

The Boston Globe

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Treating wastewater at home

By Scott Kirsner, 2/10/2003

A few years ago, when John Hatsopoulos, the cofounder of Thermo Electron Corp., wanted to add a greenhouse to his Lincoln home, he encountered an unpleasant surprise. Thanks to Massachusetts Title 5 regulations, which mandate an inspection of a home's septic system prior to expansion or sale of the home, he was forced to sink \$40,000 into his back yard, to rebuild the leach field.

So when Hatsopoulos got a call from Fred Becker, a former Thermo Electron engineer eager to tell him about a start-up Becker was working for that was developing technology to address the problem of home wastewater treatment, Hatsopoulos didn't need much educating.

Ovation Products, based in Nashua, is still testing the prototype versions of what it calls the "Clean Water Appliance" - essentially, a decentralized, downscaled wastewater treatment plant that plugs into a regular wall outlet and consumes about as much power as your fridge.

It's a dirty job, but someone ought to do it. Ovation says its appliance can turn wastewater from your house into distilled water for irrigating lawns or flushing toilets - helping homeowners comply with Title 5. Convinced by his own experience that there's a market for new technologies to handle residential wastewater, Hatsopoulos invested in the company.

The appliance could also be deployed in developing countries as a 21st-century version of the village pump, transforming contaminated drinking water - one of the leading causes of death worldwide - into the functional equivalent of Poland Spring.

Investors and the media haven't paid much attention over the past five years to technologies that produce societal and environmental benefits, like Ovation's could. Our definition of what's high-tech has been too narrow - and it needs expanding. As Ovation founder and CEO Bill Zebuhr says: "We think this is important stuff. If people are really pushed, they can do without a lot of things, like software or the Internet. But water isn't one of them."

Zebuhr started Ovation, which now has 15 employees, in 1996. Since then, he has raised just over \$5 million from investors like Hatsopoulos, MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte, and Ivan Sutherland, a vice president at Sun Microsystems.