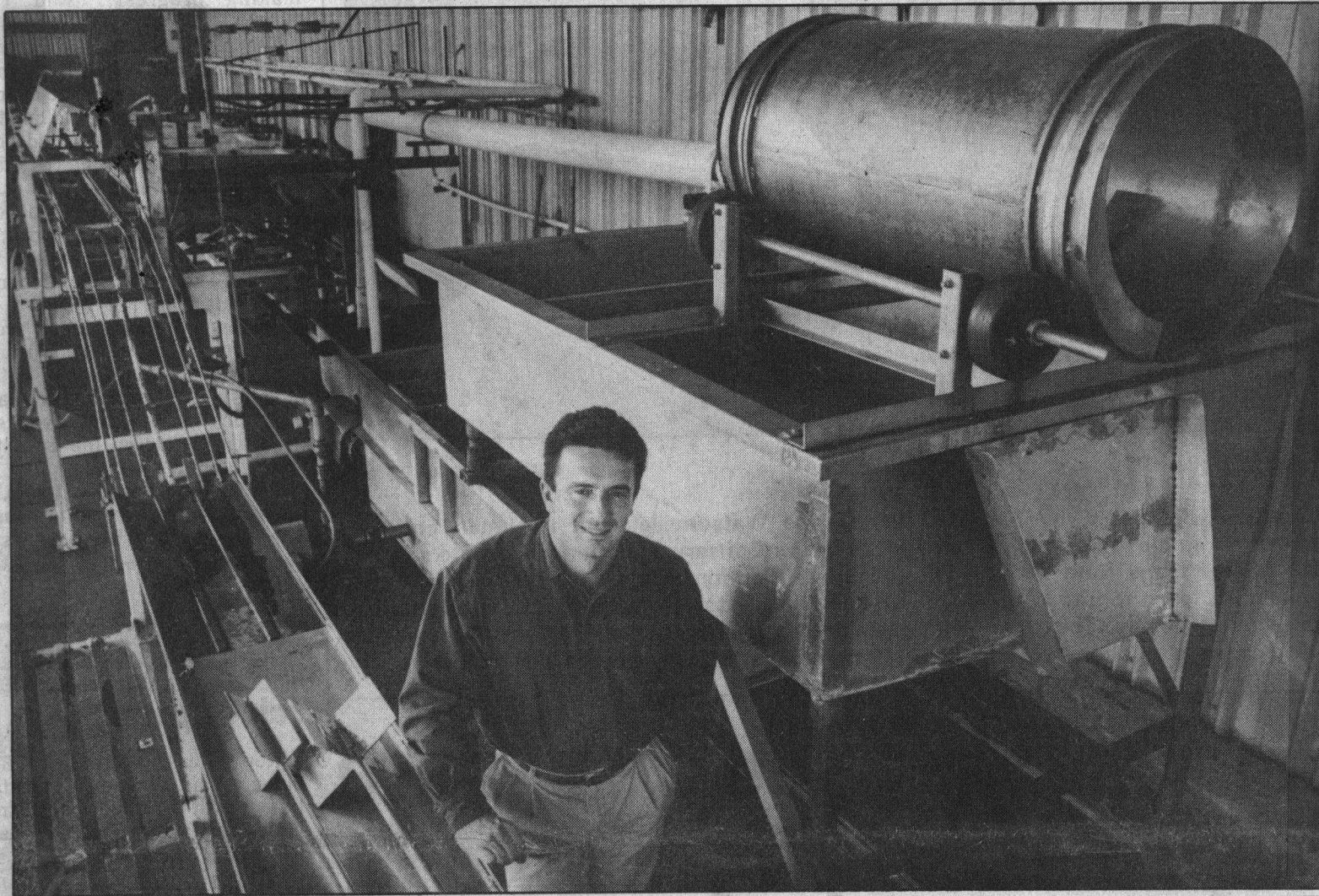


Economy the mother of invention



Kurt Ellison

Vincente Solbes and the award-winning water-saving device he developed for Naturipe Berry Growers.

Water-saving gizmo wins accolades

By JUDY BRILL
STAFF WRITER

Some might consider that a 1991 invoice sent to Naturipe Berry Growers from the city of Watsonville showing high water use was a conservation message from the water gods.

The bill not only prompted installation of a recycling system that has slashed the company's annual water consumption by 70 percent, but has earned ac-

colades for the system's designer.

At City Hall yesterday, Mayor Oscar Rios presented Vicente Solbes, Naturipe's production manager, with the first-ever Resource Conservation Award. Given by the Utilities Department, the award was funded out-of-pocket by John McGuire, Water Division director; Dave Koch, utilities director; Bob Geyer, wastewater manager;

and Steve Moore, solid-waste manager.

Solbes, 32, said the simple system was built of "bits and pieces" of materials around Naturipe's Industrial Road plant at a cost of about \$10,000. Water that washes the berries is channeled through a network of screens and settling bins that filter out organic matter and solid waste, then disinfected and returned to the cycle. The end

result is less water used, reduced sewer loading and diminished wastewater-treatment requirements.

Solbes, who has been with Naturipe for 11 years, said his background is not in engineering, but that his familiarity with all the equipment assisted in constructing the system. He also designed Naturipe's wastewater-treatment plant in Oxnard

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GIZMO

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that processes 300,00 gallons of water a day.

The company's Watsonville operation was using 120,000 gallons a day before the recycling system was installed, bringing that figure down to between 30,000 and 40,000 gallons a day, Solbes said.

In the past year, the recycling system has reduced Naturipe's demand for water by 6.2 million gallons. In addition, McGuire said the following reductions

have been achieved:

- Cut down water use by 70 percent, or 57,000 gallons.
- Reduced organic loading on the sewer line by 69 percent, for an annual total of 41,620 pounds.
- Reduced loading of the sewer line by solids, such as leaves and berry parts, by 56 percent, or 6,082 pounds.
- Cut daily operating costs by about \$120.

The idea for an awards program has been in the works since the city was tipped to Solbes' system about five months ago. Bob Ketley, Watsonville's wastewater source-control man-

ager, noticed a change in industrial-flow from Naturipe during regular monitoring and alerted McGuire, who responded, "Hey — let's give them an award."

The quarterly awards will be given to local merchants for their creativity and effectiveness in conserving water, reducing sewer use and solid-waste loading, and other projects. Notices will be going out to the city's 850 commercial customers about the new program.

For more information and applications about the award, call 728-6049.