

Gig Harbor's ECS may yet revolutionize fuel cleanups

Local chemical firm has unique solution to oil pollution

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ECS President and CEO Ed Grubbs

When Environmental Chemical Solutions Inc. took its new product for treating oil-product spills to market nearly five years ago, the chemical was seen as nothing short of miraculous.

Having developed a product capable of converting petroleum products into a non-toxic substance so benign as to be safe for human consumption, the small Gig Harbor company appeared on the brink of revolutionizing the way the world combats oil spills.

It was, after all, a clearly superior way to effectively solve many of the concerns related to what is called non-point-source hydrocarbon-product pollution of groundwater.

The collective result of an endless variety of petrochemical fuel spills and leaks that affect storm water and ultimately the oceans, non-point-source pollution today plagues the environment all across the planet.

But while the small and innovative startup venture has done well – growing some 400 percent over the past four years – it hasn't grown quite as quickly as first expected.

At least it hasn't grown as quickly as initially anticipated by its founder, Ed Grubbs, ECS's president and CEO.

“I really expected we’d be three times as big by this time,” Grubbs said candidly last week at the company’s offices at Burnham Drive Commercial Park.

But if ECS hasn’t revolutionized the oil-cleanup industry overnight, it’s not because its product – a solution called FM 186 – isn’t every bit as effective as the privately held company first believed.

To the contrary, Grubbs can point to countless clean-up efforts and field tests done over the past half-decade that only serve to validate ECS’s earliest product claims.

More likely, Grubbs now concedes, he didn’t overestimate how quickly ECS could grow, but rather he underestimated how resistant the world can be to change – revolution in particular.

“It was naive – telling people that if you mix a hazardous waste with this chemical, you can just throw it in the trash,” Grubbs laughed. “People thought I was out of my mind.”

Chief among the impediments to the company’s unique method for dealing with hydrocarbon pollution were state and federal environmental regulations that have proven slow in accepting the existence of the technology, he said.

Often equally resistant are those in industry reluctant even to assume responsibility for the environmental hazards connected with their operations, said Grubbs.

“There are a lot of small businesses that don’t want to deal with hazardous waste and there are regulators who are forced to enforce laws that sometimes don’t make sense,” he said. “We end up caught in the middle.”

During the past four years, however, Grubbs said ECS has made remarkable inroads with regulators

At the same time, the growing company has diversified its unique product lines and augmented value by placing an ever-increasing emphasis on customer service and education.

Among the new ECS products expected to hit the marketplace are a fuel-fire suppression foam that breaks down fuel and an ocean fuel-spill dispersant that floats, preventing pollution of the sea floor.

From a two-person partnership that began back in 1995, the company has grown to employ about 15 here in Gig Harbor, its headquarters and primary product shipping site.

“One of the things I’ve learned is that the secret to creating a company is finding people who are smarter than you are,” Grubbs said. “I couldn’t do this without the people we have. Everyone here is committed to what we are doing.”

Manufacturing its products now in San Diego at a facility acquired through a recent merger, the company is also designing and marketing products for sale under private labels through a second venture called RADIX, he said.

With an expanding network of service representatives, ECS now serves more than 3,000 customers in 50 states and seven foreign countries. Its products and services are used to address everything from small gasoline station spills to major remediation efforts involving pipeline spills and heavy oils.

The company's list of customers includes such familiar names as Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Tessoro, Costco, and Safeway.

"We've created the market from nothing and we've changed the way regulators look at the technology," Grubbs said of ECS's progress in recent years.

Having overcome many of the unforeseen difficulties his company has encountered, the now-seasoned CEO appeared confident the long-awaited fuel-cleanup revolution may yet be at hand.

"There are only three major oil-producers we don't have right now and we're really the only ones doing this," Grubbs said. "Most of these companies are global, so there's a whole world out there for us."

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