

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BLUE

Like many companies with a large industrial base, Monroe Environmental has seen some tough times over the last few years. Rather than fade away, the company took the bull by the horns and looked for new opportunities. The extra effort has paid off big time.

The Monroe-MI-based company has been making water and air cleaning systems since 1970, and for most of its history, work for the automotive and other industries has made up the bulk of its average \$5-\$6 million in sales. During the industry slump, however, sales plummeted, says Gary Pashaian, president of Monroe Environmental. "We went down as low as a couple of million dollars, and it got to the point where we were wondering whether we should still be in business." Instead of throwing in the towel, however, the company dug in and diversified.

By broadening its potential customer base, investing in marketing and both modifying existing products and developing new products, it is now doing more business than ever. "Last year, we had a target of \$8 million and we actually did \$12 million. And this year, we're targeting \$15 million, and we'll be disappointed if we don't hit \$20 (million), he says, noting that the company is expanding its shop to meet the increased demand.

Monroe Environmental's new focus is equipment for clarifying and recycling water and other liquids, something it decided a few years ago to begin offering to municipal treatment plants across the country. "We took what we knew about clarification and chemical treatment and we adapted it to what would be appropriate for the municipal side," he says.

The company currently has three patent applications for new products, including a novel stainless-steel support structure for the settling tubes that are used to separate suspended solids from liquids. The patent grew out of a municipal project for a city outside of Charlotte, NC. "They had four 40-foot-wide by 20-foot-long sedimentation tanks, and we designed a stainless steel support structure that was preassembled in our shop with telescoping connections for the side walls. We tore it down, shipped it to the site and were able to get it installed quickly and without cutting anything or welding anything. It saved the customer a lot of money."

Pashaian is quick to give some of the credit for the com-



pany's newfound success to a few of the business development companies in the state. "For one thing, the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center helped us a lot on developing our website," he says. "Now, we get inquiries about our products every day from around the country." The Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) also helped with financial assistance. The company needed a loan to undertake a particularly large project for Detroit's wastewater treatment facility, because municipal jobs pay for work only on completion. With the stricter criteria at banks, however, the company couldn't secure a loan, he says. "The MEDC, through funding, was able to help underwrite a loan, so the bank (Monroe Bank & Trust) could give us work-in-progress money. That really helped us."

With all of this new municipal work and with the return of work for the recovering industry sector, Monroe Environmental is thriving. "We think a nice balance will be 50 percent municipal and 50 percent industrial," Pashaian says. "As long as we can have enough variety in our products, it will be a good basis for building the company."

The bright future of Monroe Environmental has special meaning for Pashaian. "My Dad started this company and I took over in 1988. Now, I'm 62 and I have tremendous renewed interest in the business," he says. "My son Adam is 24, and I can see him developing our business interest here in Michigan for a long, long time."

panies or what kinds of controls need to be put in place," says Peterson.

LimnoTech's projects also go beyond municipalities and industries. For example, the company is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to generate a model of the land that drains into Lake Erie's Maumee Bay. This watershed model will help to reveal the potential relationship between nutrient-rich runoff and harmful algal blooms on the Great Lakes. "In 2011, we had the worst algal bloom in history, and there's a big question about what's causing it and what we can do about it," he says. "We're applying watershed models that

are linked to river water-quality models and an integrated algal model of the bay. Once we organize the data, we'll have a better understanding of what the driving mechanisms are and what changes have occurred. Then we can use those models to evaluate management options."

The company is also working with the World Wildlife Fund and Nature Conservancy to evaluate watersheds in water-impooverished areas of the world and assess the merits of different management alternatives.

In general, people are starting to perceive water use differently, says Peterson. "When I

started out in this business, it was very much a fragmented view: You would look at your little problem and your little piece of the world, and that was it. Now, there's a mounting shift toward holistic, integrated, multidisciplinary approaches to sustainability, plus an increased focus on how we change what we're doing on the front end, as opposed to having to deal with the problem on the back end," he says. "I think we're making important strides in that way."

For him and for LimnoTech, Peterson believes Michigan is the place to be. "A lot of our work does deal with the Great Lakes, but more than that, we love it here. It's home." 🌊