



S.E. Wisconsin behind other regions in water patents



Barry Grossman . . . Attorney, Foley & Lardner

Milwaukee attorney Barry Grossman is bullish on Milwaukee's future as a hub for water-based technology and businesses.

Grossman, an attorney who specializes in intellectual property issues at [Foley & Lardner](#) in Milwaukee, is a member of the [Milwaukee Water Council](#) board of directors. But if there is one thing the Milwaukee region needs to improve in its quest as a water-tech leader, Grossman said it is the area's ability to obtain patents for new water technologies.

Grossman and John Lazarus, who is a member of Grossman's Milwaukee intellectual property team, recently released the Water Technology U.S. Patent Landscape 2008 Annual Report.

Of all U.S.-origin patents issued in 2008, California claimed 24.1 percent of patents filed, followed by Texas with 6.7 percent. Wisconsin ranked 15th among all states with less than 1 percent. The top technological areas of these Wisconsin patents included X-ray or gamma-ray systems, chemistry, molecular biology, microbiology, internal combustion engines and papermaking. Water technologies were far down the list, according to Grossman. The Business Journal invited Grossman to be the focus of this issue's Take 5 question-and-answer session with reporter Pete Millard.

Why are southeast Wisconsin companies lagging other regions in receiving patents?

"There are two major reasons. Our companies don't receive as much federal funding as other companies, although we are in the process of establishing a National Science Foundation industry/university collaborative research center, which hopefully will lead to more federal funding. The second point is that water companies in this area don't have as many cooperative agreements with university researchers, which is a natural factor in the innovation cycle."

Realizing the Water Council is in its infancy, why is this coalition critical to the region becoming a stop on the international water map?

"While it started out as an ad hoc group of the Milwaukee 7 and is now a stand-alone C-3 nonprofit, it has expanded its role as a cheerleader and promotional tool highlighting the

resources in the region. Through the Water Council, our cluster of 120 water companies are calling attention to the available Great Lakes research and development capacity at the [UWM Great Lakes Institute](#). The Water Council is also advocating on behalf of this region's growth potential in water technologies, ranging from meters, pumps and valves to pollution control and decreasing water demand by participating in the water trade mission to Israel in November."

While UWM and MU are in the early stages of forming a National Science Foundation-sponsored industry/university collaborative research center, what other types of collaborative programs or initiatives could raise the visibility and fortunes of southeast Wisconsin water-tech companies?

"Our business and university leaders ought to consider establishing an NSF center of excellence. For example, the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana has a water-focused center of excellence that has received about \$20 million in research money. We are not at the point yet to qualify for that kind of center, but in the future it's the kind of research and development funding we need."

Does Wisconsin and its local governments have the financial wherewithal to invest more heavily in water technology and the patience to allow the industry sector to develop?

"Yes, we've had support from the city and Mayor Tom Barrett with the plan for a water-tech business park in Walker's Point. Gov. Jim Doyle has promised funding for the UWM School of Freshwater Sciences, and that's a significant step in helping us move forward.

"Two years ago at a Milwaukee water summit, UWM professor Sam White released a study showing we can't afford to wait to make investments because competitors in Michigan, Illinois, Sweden and Singapore are aggressively pursuing water companies. While I think we have a lead, not only through our research capabilities at the [UWM Great Lakes Water Institute](#), but with our cluster of water companies, we have to continue to be creative in attracting more companies to the cluster."

Of all the different water technologies and industries in southeast Wisconsin, what sectors hold the most promise for immediate returns?

"The one area that stands out in my mind is metering. [Badger Meter Inc.](#) in Brown Deer is one of the largest meter companies in North America. As people become more focused on scarcity and emphasize how much water people are using, the ability to accurately measure its use is critical.

"A second area is related to nanotechnology and filtration systems. We have a lead in this area that may lead to better wastewater treatment technology. A third area is the licensing of control sensors that create more data so municipalities and companies can figure out flow rates and pollution levels in water networks. Control sensors can also lead to more efficient recycling of water."