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107-Year-Old Oelwein Company Uses High-Tech System to Reduce Wastewater by 70%

[EDITOR'S NOTE: A photo showing water before and after it has been processed through the Norchem system can be downloaded at jwmorton.com/218]

OELWEIN, Iowa, June 11, 2013—City Workplace Uniforms & Mats has installed a Norchem Ultrapure® water filtration system that allows the company to recycle 70 percent of its wastewater (100,000 gallons per week) compared to five percent recycled by its old system. The reason for the investment was twofold for this 107-year-old family-owned company specializing in the rental and cleaning of uniforms and mats. “We want to reduce cost over the long run while being a good steward of the community,” says Colin Wetlaufer, vice president and general manager of City Workplace Uniforms & Mats. “We’re in a small community and our business accounts for a large percentage of water use. With our new system, the water we give back to the City of Oelwein is very close to the clarity and pH balance of the water we get from them. We feel good about that.”

While Norchem’s Ultrapure was introduced in the mid-1990s, City Workplace Uniforms & Mats did not see a need to replace its existing system at that time because they were compliant with Oelwein’s water quality standards. But in 2009, Norchem caught the attention of Wetlaufer when he visited their booth during an industry trade show. “Anytime someone says I can recycle 70 percent of our wastewater and have chemical-free treatment, I’m going to listen,” says Wetlaufer.

Wetlaufer spent the next few years learning about water filtration and wastewater recycling before purchasing the Ultrapure system. In addition to its efficiency in recycling wastewater, Ultrapure offers another impressive benefit. “During the process, water is pushed through a filter and heat is created, which enabled us to eliminate two 1000-gallon water heaters,” he explains. The system is expected to pay for itself in five to seven years.

According to Wetlaufer, their new, sophisticated water filtration technology can be boiled down to a simple description: they’re taking dirty water, passing it through a filter and it comes out clean water. “In the past we had to add harsh chemicals to our wastewater to bring it into compliance with the Department of Natural Resources requirements. Adding chemicals to make water compliant just didn’t feel right.” Ultrapure has enabled City Workplace Uniforms & Mats to stop using chemicals to treat its water. This eliminates the cost of working with an outside chemical vendor and creates a safer work environment because water treatment chemicals are no longer kept on the property.

With the previous system at City Workplace Uniforms & Mats, wastewater from the cleaning process was treated chemically and solids were removed. These solids were compressed into a muddy substance that was again chemically treated before being discharged into the city sewer. Comparatively, the Norchem system removes sand and dirt, which is recycled. The wastewater is sent through a cleaning process a second time, which removes sludge that is hauled away and sold for use in making motor oil.

“City Workplace used to be our biggest user of water,” says Vic Kane, utilities superintendent for the City of Oelwein. “That is no longer true due to the degree to which they clean the water.” Ultrapure has allowed City Workplace Uniforms & Mats to reduce the amount of water it uses each month from 926,024 to 261,710 gallons of water. “The big thing is, they are lowering the load for the city, which frees up space at our wastewater plant,” says Kane. “We now have excess capacity that can be allocated for other businesses.”

Norchem’s system has also reduced the amount of time the city’s water department spends monitoring wastewater at City Workplace Uniforms & Mats. “Our old system had the potential for inaccuracies so the water department took regular samples to check all sorts of things that could be askew,” explains Wetlaufer. The efficiency of Ultrapure has enabled the city to reduce the amount of testing it does for impurities.

In addition to their new environmentally friendly water system, City Workplace Uniforms & Mats has also gone green in other areas. Until a few years ago, uniforms and textile products were thrown into the trash once their condition began to degrade. Today the company bales its old clothes, which are sent to Arizona for recycling into blown insulation, prison mattresses and appliance and automotive insulation. Around 66,000 pounds of garments are recycled each year. The company also asks customers to return hangers so they can be reused. “We use 10,000 steel hangers on average, so our hanger recycling policy impacts our bottom line and the environment,” says Wetlaufer.

“Our goal is to get the job done but also be environmentally conscious,” says Wetlaufer.

City Workplace Uniforms & Mats was founded in 1906. Its service area extends across 28 counties in northeastern Iowa, from Des Moines to the corner of Wisconsin. The company provides customers with convenient one-stop shopping of uniform rental, dust control, safety apparel, embroidery needs, restroom supplies, paper products and linen supply. The company launders 110,000 pounds of rental items per week.