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The Coming Crisis A healthy dose of skepticism can kill you

Randy Stroman

Most of us have a healthy dose of skepticism, but sometimes we can still be fooled into believing something that isn't true. When we hear something that is new to us, our first reaction may be disbelief. While some skepticism may be healthy, too much of it will hurt us, maybe even kill us. A case in point is the coming water crisis.

While most of us have heard that our supply of clean, safe drinking water may be at risk, even in America, what measurable changes have we made in our homes, businesses and individual lifestyles to address this crisis? Some companies in our industry are responding to the problem, making progress toward sustainability programs. But if the problem is as big as some experts predict, then we are all guilty of apathy, due in large part to skepticism that says, "It's not really that bad; it can't be."

If we truly believe that our present quality of life is at risk, we would respond with more urgency. While I cannot pretend to speak for an entire industry, based on our response, we do not believe a water crisis is on the horizon.

Hidden Costs

The greatest barrier to a quality response by the foodservice industry is the fact that water is cheap in this country. However, low-cost water does not offset the cost of designing, executing and maintaining viable sustainability programs. The economics simply do not justify serious action by stakeholders. As a result, we move at a slow pace.

There is progress; however, if the experts are right, then our current level of response will cause a water shortfall in our industry, forcing some restaurants to close once the reality of the crisis catches up with our inactivity.

The Cost of Apathy

Why is there so much concern? Consider the following facts provided by the International Water Management Institute:

- America must spend \$255 billion in the next five years to prevent deterioration of our water infrastructure. We plan to spend half that amount.
- Parts of America use up to 80 percent of their available freshwater resources. That means even a slight drought or increase in usage will cause a water shortage.
- Californians are expected to experience their fourth straight year of serious drought in 2011.
- Globally, 1.2 billion people live in areas with inadequate water supplies.
- Globally, 1.6 billion live in areas where there is water, but they cannot afford to make it potable.

While the current conditions present a serious cause for concern, according to the United Nations Environmental Program, water use is increasing even faster than the population. In fact, UN scientists have concluded that global water demands will increase by 40 percent in the next 10 years. According to the Pacific Institute, this means two-thirds of the world will live under conditions of water scarcity by 2025. Even if we manage to maintain our status quo in the United States, the world water crisis will place pressures on our infrastructure in a way we have never seen before.

"Close to three-quarters of the planet's surface is covered in water," wrote Josh Harkinson, author and blogger,

in "What's Your Water Footprint?" in August 2009. "However, Earth's accessible fresh water supply only accounts for 1 percent of this water. Since 1950, the world's water usage has tripled, while the world's wetlands have been cut in half.

"As we grow, we use more and more water, creating dams and irrigation to feed our growth," he wrote. "The water left over is becoming increasingly unsafe to swim or fish—40 percent of U.S. rivers are polluted to this point."

A New Reality

The data suggests that a water crisis is looming, and it is a serious threat to our industry. Imagine getting a notice from your local municipality announcing water rationing that affects one of your restaurants. The notice mandates a 40 percent cut in your water usage and threatens to turn off your supply if you exceed your quota.

What about increased instances of boil orders? Boston experienced such a situation in May 2010, when a water main break caused the city's water supply to become contaminated, requiring a boil order affecting nearly 2 million Bostonians. Coffee shops, restaurants and other foodservice operators were forced to shut down until potable water was restored three days later.

The Call to Action

As foodservice professionals, we cannot take a casual approach to the water crisis. It is time to act. As politician Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Having been in the foodservice industry for more than 37 years, I can tell you that we have some of the best and brightest people in any industry. We have great leaders who have built the foodservice industry into the largest non-government employer in the history of the United States. We have the talent and the resources to solve the water crisis in our industry.

So why haven't we solved the problem? We are treating sustainability as intellectual property, protecting our discoveries as we would our trade secrets. While I respect a company's right to protect the money and resources invested in sustainability discovery and accomplishments, protectionism is not going to fix the problem; and until we fix the problem, the industry remains at risk. We need to openly share ideas among our best companies and get rid of the confidentiality agreements that keep us from achieving true progress.

So how do we as an industry open up the doors of progress? I propose that we form an industry think tank, comprised of scientists, engineers and manufacturers from our best and brightest companies, to share the cost and ideas that lead to new discoveries and true progress. I further propose that the findings of the group be published on a quarterly basis for the benefit of the whole industry.

Finally, I propose that the industry embrace these new discoveries, adopt them into practice and eventually self-police our ideas in order to keep the government from imposing standards and guidelines we cannot accept. This unprecedented action will cause our industry to stand out as an example to the rest of the world. We may not be able to solve the global water crisis, but we can make a difference within our industry if we agree to work together.

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