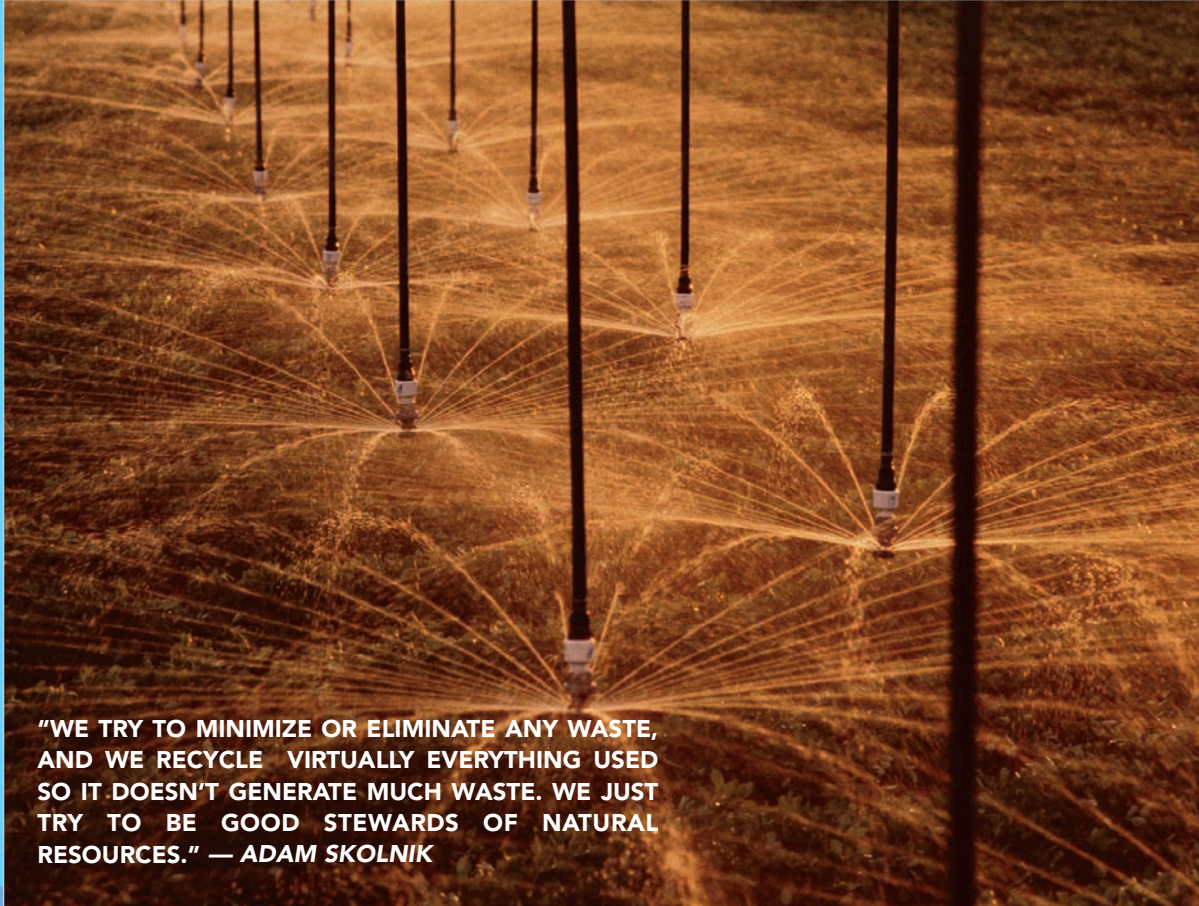


A Spreading INFLUENCE

DIGGING DEEP ROOTS IN THE GLOBAL BUSINESS OF WATER

By Michael
Candalaria



"WE TRY TO MINIMIZE OR ELIMINATE ANY WASTE, AND WE RECYCLE VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING USED SO IT DOESN'T GENERATE MUCH WASTE. WE JUST TRY TO BE GOOD STEWARDS OF NATURAL RESOURCES." — ADAM SKOLNIK



Who could have known? In the early 1960s, Joe Senninger, a citrus grower in Groveland, was merely seeking to rid himself of pesky mud daubers. The wasps, measuring less than an inch in length, were working their way into the often-muddy overhead sprinklers used in area citrus fields and impeding water flow.

So, Senninger invented an insect-proof device that he adapted to the old brass impact sprinklers of the day.

Essentially, the device was a long narrow cylinder, like a straw. When water flowed to open the sprinkler valve, the “dauber stopper” was pushed back to let the water flow out the nozzle. When the water was turned off, the cylinder returned to its original position and prevented dirt daubers from getting inside.

Simple enough, right? Well, the name Dauber Stopper was trademarked, a patent soon arrived and shortly thereafter a company was formed, with Senninger as the founder. In 1963, the company began designing and manufacturing a plastic dauber stopper. Or, as current company president Adam Skolnik describes: “The guys had applied space-aged materials — engineering-grade thermal plastics — to designing impact sprinklers that had this insect-proof feature for overhead citrus irrigation.”

Today, five decades later, Skolnik runs a 150-employee operation that, while still headquartered in Central Florida and continuing to sell the option of dauber stopping on its sprinklers, has

subsidiaries in Brazil and South Africa, in addition to warehouses in Nebraska and Texas, and other locations in Colorado, Connecticut and Guatemala. Based in Clermont, Senninger Irrigation now is a global manufacturer of irrigation components that include sprinklers, spray nozzles and pressure regulators, mostly for use in agriculture but also for nursery, wastewater treatment and mining applications.

“We run this operation twenty-four hours a day, three shifts,” says Skolnik, whose work with the private, closely held company dates back 25 years, including 23 years as an employee.

Much of that work also results from a second key 1960s innovation, this one involving water pressure. Central Florida’s rolling terrain, mainly in Lake County, made pressure consistency problematic. The sprinklers on the top of a hill had low pressure, because of the elevation, and wouldn’t perform well. Conversely, there was excess pressure at the bottom of the hill. In response, Senninger, officially a citrus grower-turned-inventor by then, patented a pre-set pressure regulating valve that effectively maintained constant pressure, regardless of terrain.

Through the years, cites Skolnik, Senninger Irrigation has been driven by the same motivation that led its founder to those initial inventions: water and energy conservation.

“We always considered ourselves a ‘green’ company,” he says. “Everything we design our products around is low energy, so they are meant and designed to operate at the lowest pressure possible. Regarding water, we try



to use as little as possible by developing products that have uniform application of water.”

The company's *Super Spray* nozzle, for example, helps reduce water and energy requirements on center pivots, which are used to irrigate up to 200 acres from one machine. Its interchangeable parts and wide range of spray patterns helped it quickly become one of the world's best agriculture spray nozzles. Similarly, the *Quad-Spray* was developed specifically for Low Energy Precision Application (LEPA). LEPA is a relatively new irrigation practice that requires very little water and energy to operate. One of the biggest benefits of LEPA is that it makes pivot irrigation possible in regions previously hindered by limited water supplies.

Notably, the need for water conservation is great, according to the Irrigation Association (IA), based in Falls Church, Va. Approximately 80 percent of water withdrawn nationwide is used for agriculture.

“That means there's a lot of room for water savings by just increasing the efficiency in agriculture,” comments Beth Casteel, the trade group's communications manager.

“Green” thinking is also evident in Senninger Irrigation's manufacturing process, adds Skolnik, a past president of IA and present chair of its Education Foundation.

“We try to minimize or eliminate any waste, and we recycle virtually everything used so it doesn't generate much waste. We just try to be good stewards of natural resources,” he says.

The result: marketplace distinction, Skolnik contends.

“A car isn't a truck. A truck isn't a car. There are differences. Now, do they [competitors] all sling water? Yeah. In its simplest form, we spread water out, as do others. But, when it comes to efficiency and reliability, that's where you start differentiating yourself,” he says.

Not coincidentally, the word is spreading, too. While all manufacturing occurs

in Clermont, roughly 30 to 40 percent of the products go overseas.

Still, Senninger Irrigation's broadening horizons don't include a move out of the region. Pointing to Metro Orlando's infrastructure and labor pool, he says, “There's absolutely no need to move. Central Florida is definitely the place to be.”

Nor are there any intentions of straying from the simple approach used by Joe Senninger so many years ago: One, identify a problem; two, find a solution. In other words, it seeks to stay ahead of the curve in business by harkening back to the past.

“At the end of the day, the real innovations come from the field,” Skolnik concludes. “It's solving the problems. ... So, it's our ability to be well connected and in tune with what's happening in the field — who is using the products, who is running into the problems, then our ability to take that information and put it into a product.”

Just like the old Dauber Stopper. ✕



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