

# waterless urinal company flush with contracts

A BRITISH SOURCED  
SOLUTION TO WATER  
WASTAGE ON A MASSIVE  
SCALE.

story by **Belinda Meares**



## venture capital

A small Adelaide business is helping save millions of litres of water from being drained by the nation's urinals. The breakthrough requires no sophisticated technology; it just recruits natural organisms to do the job. The scientific term for this process is "bio-remediation".

Desert™ Ecosystems markets dissolvable cubes containing beneficial bacteria that keep urinals clean with a minimal amount of water. The system requires no new plumbing or retrofitting. After an initial deep clean, you just turn off the taps and keep to a simple cleaning regime that eliminates the use of toxic chemicals. Not only do the microbes combat odour, they also help keep drains clear of uric scale.

A conventional urinal in a commercial building consumes an average 151,000 litres of water a year. More specific figures suggest that a school with 500 male students typically uses 2.85 megalitres annually and an office building with 100 male staff, 880,000 litres.

Popular wisdom doubts that a public washroom could possibly stay sanitary without the quantities of water, cleaning agents and deodorisers normally devoted to this Herculean task. Not so, explains Richard Boyce, managing director of Desert™ Ecosystems. He used to run a hygiene service company and became increasingly uneasy about its environmental impacts. Seeking a better solution, he discovered a UK company that had developed the microbial cube. An agency deal granted Boyce the licence to Australia, and in 2002 he rebranded the product and launched Desert™ Ecosystems.

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Boyce estimates that the cube is saving around five to ten megalitres of water a day, in around 2,000 sites across Australia. Progress was slow at first, he reports, but has grown apace since he appointed distributors in most states, and is branching into international marketing (in the US and Asia) on behalf of the UK company. The Desert™ Ecosystems network covers both rural and metropolitan areas, and some distributors are recruiting resellers. However, Boyce stresses, 'We are not wholesalers. It is really important for us to support our product, so we do quality checks every three months.'

Although simple to use, he explains, the cube won't do its job properly if cleaners don't understand how to service the washrooms; nor will they if urinals are poorly plumbed.

Signage explaining how the cube works also needs to be prominently displayed, otherwise users are tempted to turn the taps back on and flush away.

### Changing the face of public amenities

Acceptance is growing of waterless urinals, as more appear in high profile places. Desert™ Ecosystems has among its clients the Melbourne Tennis Centre, the Adelaide Festival Centre and the Melbourne Racing Club. The low cost and efficiency of the cube is now attracting a flood of enquiries from would-be resellers, says Boyce.

However, he is very selective about who he brings into the network. 'The people we have selling the product have to have the same sort of beliefs - they have to be passionate about conservation.'

Another attribute he seeks in associates is the willingness to contribute financially to grow the business. 'Because we've been able to pool our resources and we all chip in with marketing and promotion costs, it has worked really well for us.'

Promotion of waterless urinals involves more than a product brand-building exercise, he explains. It requires an educational effort to change attitudes. Bringing officialdom onside is also an important factor. Boyce says that pressures facing organisations over water use are certainly boosting



sales. However, he regrets that the Queensland government backed off its plan to mandate that all water-inefficient non-residential urinals be turned off as part of its arsenal of level 4 restrictions. This could still occur in the future, he believes. Another reason the business could boom is when water is priced on a realistic cost-recovery basis – more like \$4 a kilolitre than the current average of \$1.50.

Aside from the microbial cube, other waterless urinal systems are now available. Some use replaceable cartridge devices, and others come as complete units with fittings. But as

Boyce remarks, competition should not be a concern. 'It's obviously a growing market. If our competitors do the right thing, ideally we'll all get a bigger marketplace.'

For now, he says, Desert™ Ecosystems is not looking for investment capital. However capital could be welcome in future if the business finds itself on the threshold of major expansion due to further constraints on water use and rising international demand.

In line with his environmental values, Boyce aims to make his company 'carbon-neutral' by offsetting fuel consumption with tree planting. Desert™ Ecosystems buys green energy, and also donates to Water Aid, a charity that funds water projects in poorer nations. □

## a splash at the races

Melbourne Racing Club (MRC) became a convert to waterless urinals last year after having trialed the Desert™ cubes over several months in its Tabaret buildings. It then went ahead and installed the cubes at its Caulfield racecourse's permanent and temporary facilities, in time for the October spring carnival. 'Over the three days, we have estimated the saving of around one megalitre of valuable drinking water', says Stephen Goss, the club's manager of risk and compliance. He adds that the club's Sandown racecourse facilities are also being converted to waterless urinals.

The initiative is part of the MRC's commitment to sustainable water management. The issue came to a head in late 2005, says Goss, when the club was laying new track. 'It takes a lot of water to maintain a turf and we can't continue to expect to draw on mains water,' he says.

At Caulfield, the club uses stormwater captured in two reservoirs to irrigate the course, and is now investigating ways of capturing and storing it. As the club sources its water from on-site aquifer bores, Goss says there is the potential to use ASR technology to store highly cleaned stormwater. Overall, the MRC aims to reduce mains-water consumption by 60%. However, the scale of its efforts will depend on state financial assistance. 'We can justify the plan on social and environmental grounds,' says Goss, 'but it won't stack up financially without support.'