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Sand company re-creates habitat

Sustainable development is firm's goal

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Wandering through a flower and garden show in Traverse City, Mich., two years ago, Craig Rautiola came across a booth occupied by Saving Birds Thru Habitat.

Rautiola managed the nearby Wexford Sand Co., owned by Fairmount Minerals near Chardon, and wanted advice on how to restore spent areas of the undulating open-pit mine to a more-natural state.

He asked Kay Charter, executive director of Saving Birds Thru Habitat, for help.

"I was dubious," Charter recalled. "I thought, This is a company that wants to be greenwashed.' "

Greenwashing is the term for a company ingratiating itself to an environmental group as cover for the bad things it is actually doing. But the more Charter talked to Rautiola, the more she realized he was no poseur. She later visited the Wexford mine and discovered it home to 47 species of birds, many singing in defense of their territory.

The next thing Charter knew, she was instructing Rautiola on the kinds of grasses to plant and the proper bird boxes to install. Today, the Wexford mine is on its way to returning 18 acres of disturbed terrain to native prairie habitat.

Charter expects the plot will eventually become a nesting home for at-risk species of birds, like the bobolink and the grasshopper sparrow.

The mine's recovery is testament to Fairmount Minerals' commitment to practice sustainability - a trendy term for doing business in a way that respects natural and human resources. People are noticing. The Audubon Society of Michigan awarded Fairmount Minerals its 2005 Environmental Business of the Year Award.

Charter, who owns a bird sanctuary in northern Michigan, has become an unofficial consultant to the company, offering suggestions on restoring bird habitat at several of its

sites, including its sandstone mine in Chardon. A big problem there is *Phragmites australis*, a common reed that looks pretty but actually chokes out growth needed to harbor native birds and the insects they eat.

"She's like an extension of our business," Rautiola said of Charter.

While Fairmount Minerals has committed to saving birds at its mines in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin, its devotion to socially conscious business practices doesn't end there. The company, for instance, offers its employees \$2,000 toward the purchase of a hybrid vehicle.

The Business Civic Leadership Center of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently presented its 2006 Corporate Stewardship Award for small and midsize businesses to Fairmount Minerals.

And thanks in part to Fairmount Minerals, the components of five water filtration systems were shipped recently from the United States to a village outside Eldoret, Kenya, where they will be assembled to provide germ-free water for a seminary, a school, an orphanage and a medical center.

The 4½-foot tubes will have no moving parts, require no electricity and cost a mere \$15. They will be filled with sand from Fairmount Minerals, including a four-inch chemically treated section to remove bacteria that transmit deadly diseases like dysentery and cholera.

The idea is to empower Kenyans to market the water systems, creating a business opportunity and safer drinking water at the same time.

The developer of the system is Aqua Clara, a nonprofit organization based in Holland, Mich., but Fairmount Minerals has provided much support. Aqua Clara President Bob McDonald, a former marketing director with Dow Chemical in Africa and the Middle East, said he feels blessed by the company's response.

When McDonald first contacted Fairmount Minerals, all he wanted was to buy 500 pounds of quality sand, he said. But what he got was a partner willing to donate the sand, as well as time and money.

Though McDonald didn't know it yet, Fairmount Minerals was primed for such a project. The company supplies sand for water filtration around the world, including Cleveland, and had discussed the problem of unsanitary water in Third World countries during a company-wide summit outside Chicago in 2005.

The purpose of the summit, which included vendors, customers and even groups that might be considered adversaries of Fairmount Minerals, was to formulate a new business model for the company around sustainable development.

Fairmount Minerals committed itself to the wholesale embrace of green, socially conscious concepts, not as an adjunct to its main business, but as a philosophy that works its way into everything it does. In April, the company will begin reporting on a variety of its efforts to the U.N. Global Compact, a collection of businesses devoted to a cleaner environment, respect for workers and ethical practices.

"Our motto is 'Do good, do well,' and all our people understand that," Fairmount Minerals Chief Executive Chuck Fowler said.

It's not the Rockefeller or Carnegie brand of philanthropy that follows years of selfish business practices, Fowler said, but rather a commitment to public welfare as the company grows and prospers.

Fowler encourages the same business philosophy in his vendors and customers. With annual sales of more than \$300 million, Fairmount Minerals is the largest supplier of foundry sand in the United States. Its biggest customer is the Ford Motor Co. foundry in Brook Park, where engines are cast using sand.

It's also a major supplier of sand used to extract oil and natural gas from the ground. Sand is pumped into plate-shaped fractures to expand their size and prop them open under intense pressure. The company sells fracturing and water filtration sand to Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the company has four plants in the United States that coat sand or ceramic beads with resin. It has joint ventures in Mexico and Denmark and another planned for China. Fowler said his Chinese plant will exceed that country's pollution standards.

"A lot of us think the Chinese are way behind on environmental issues and so forth, and there's no question there's a lot of pollution in China," he said, "but what we see certainly is that their regulations for emissions are certainly as strong as they are in the United States for new construction and new businesses."

Responsible behavior is not new to Fairmount Minerals. Five years ago the company added a \$1.2 million crusher and conveyor system to its Chardon mine that extends nearly three-quarters of a mile from the quarry to the processing plant. The conveyor saved money, but it also reduced pollution, eliminating the need for giant diesel dump trucks to make some 150 daily runs from the quarry to the plant.

Sustainability has taken on a new urgency since the company's 2005 summit, which employed a technique known as appreciative inquiry, developed by David Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University and director of its Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit.

Appreciative inquiry allows for a group discussion that focuses on answers, not problems. Fairmount Minerals recently gave Case \$2 million to endow a chair in social entrepreneurship at the Weatherhead School of Management. The company gave the

school \$400,000 more as seed money for the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit.

Fowler believes being a good corporate citizen does more than improve society; it also makes good business sense, especially for a company with inherently disruptive practices that draws its share of public scrutiny.

"I grew up as a farm kid," Fowler said. "Farm kids understand the value of the land and understand the value of taking care of that land because that land has taken care of you."

The company has done more than restore the environment. It has restored hope in the heart of Kay Charter, who, after the scandals of Enron, WorldCom and the like, had lost faith in corporate America.

"Fairmount to me is the anti-Enron," she said.

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