

Small steps by all can effect big improvements to our environment

By Gary S. Michel

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There's a water fountain outside my office, and I'm using it more often these days. The more I use it, the less bottled water I drink and the fewer number of plastic bottles that end up in landfills. That may not seem much of a contribution to the world's enormous environmental challenges, but it's a start, and like compounding interest, it can add up.

INDIVIDUAL SMALL steps are the big idea powering Earth Day 2011, the 41st annual celebration of the event that started the modern environmental movement. In recognition of the benefits of personal, organizational and corporate action, Earth Day 2011, which we will celebrate Friday, focuses on the theme "A Billion Acts of Green."

The goal of the worldwide campaign is to register a billion commitments -- simple individual acts and larger organizational initiatives -- that measurably reduce carbon emissions and support sustainability.

I'm happy to say that Club Car is doing its part. At the associate level, volunteers throughout the company have formed "Green Teams" to brainstorm ideas that make Club Car a more environmentally responsible business.

We've removed individual printers from most workstations and introduced a centralized printing system that reduces paper and energy consumption. Motion sensors in offices and restrooms automatically turn off lights when no one is in the room, further reducing the amount of electrical energy we use.

Away from the office, a number of our associates are making their own personal contributions, which I applaud.

At the operations level, we've created welding centers that in the winter months use the warm air generated during the welding process to heat portions of the plant. This innovation reduced natural gas consumption by 40 percent in its first year.

Programmable shutoff controls installed last year also are lowering electricity needs when the plant is not in full operation.

MAYBE THE MOST significant contribution to sustainability has been in the area of waste. By encouraging our suppliers to ship more of their parts in returnable containers, we've reduced waste -- mainly cardboard, Styrofoam and bubble wrap -- leaving the plant by 28 percent per vehicle produced. At the same time, we've increased our own waste recycling by 39 percent.

In a classic example of doing well by doing good, these production-ready parts reduce the amount of packaging associates have to handle, therefore increasing productivity. That's sustainability that translates directly to our bottom line.

Each of Georgia's major golf car manufacturers also stands to benefit from legislation that was passed Thursday, the final day of Georgia's 2011 legislative session. The bill allows personal transportation vehicles such as golf cars that are equipped with certain safety provisions to be driven in neighborhoods, college campuses and urban areas.

We believe the measure will encourage many to leave their gas-thirsty automobiles in the driveway on occasion, especially for short trips, thereby reducing carbon emissions and our nation's dependency on foreign oil.

Of more local interest and relevancy, the law also should create new customers for the state's golf car manufacturers and more jobs for Augusta. Gov. Nathan Deal is expected to sign the bill into law, further reinforcing Georgia's reputation as a global leader in green transportation.

MEANWHILE, AS the Billion Acts of Green campaign reminds us, making a dent in the global environmental challenge starts with each of us, on the job and around the house.

Culture change begins with small steps, and until each of us takes the first one, we'll never know the environmental impact that millions of people, corporations and organizations can make to better our environment.

(The writer is president and CEO of Club Car LLC, an Ingersoll Rand company; and serves on the board of the Environmental Institute for Golf, a collaborative effort of the environmental and golf communities dedicated to strengthening the compatibility of golf with the natural environment.)