

## Launching World-Class Water Technology in the Heart of Milwaukee

*By Elizabeth Thelen*

### THE BREW ACCELERATOR UNLEASHES WATER INNOVATION

The BREW (Business. Research. Entrepreneurship. In Wisconsin.) Accelerator, which recently won IEDC's Gold Award for Entrepreneurship, unleashes water innovation by funding water technology startups with a 24-month launch target. The BREW is part of The Water Council (TWC) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The formation of TWC helped fill the need for the 21st century industry by leveraging Milwaukee's history and attracting new technology companies with innovative and creative people. With a robust network in place, the opening of the Global Water Center, and the galvanizing vision as the epicenter for water technology innovation, it was a natural fit for The Water Council to create the BREW Accelerator. In this article, take a tour of the accelerator and its portfolio.

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# launching world-class

## WATER TECHNOLOGY IN THE HEART OF MILWAUKEE

By Elizabeth Thelen

**T**he BREW (Business. Research. Entrepreneurship. In Wisconsin.) Accelerator unleashes water innovation by funding water technology startups with commercialization potential. The Water Council in Milwaukee created and runs the BREW. Founded on a century of discovering inventive solutions for water issues, The Water Council (TWC) was established as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2009 by Milwaukee-area businesses, education, and government leaders.

With a mission of aligning the regional freshwater research community with water-related industries, the WC has played a vital role in establishing Milwaukee as a leading water technology cluster in the United States and one of the most powerful in the world. The driving force behind this success is the spirit of collaboration among public, private, and academic sectors and the shared commitment to finding innovative solutions to critical global water issues such as water quantity (sometimes too much and sometimes too little) and water quality, what is actually in the water, and reuse, the optimization of water.

The Water Council is focused exclusively on economic and business development for the water technology industry and the network of programs and support is unequalled among water cluster organizations in the United States. The BREW Accelerator is just one of the WC's programs to help companies launch, grow, and connect. It is housed in the Global Water Center, a state-of-the-art water business and research facility in Milwaukee.



BREW participant using the Flow Lab at the Global Water Center.

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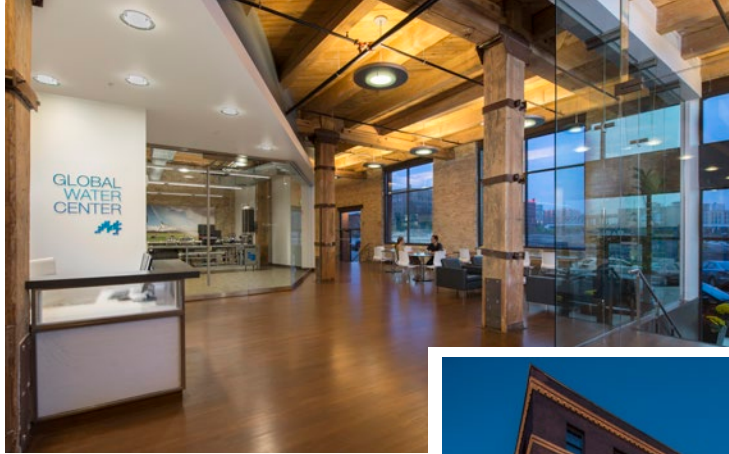
### ABOUT THE WATER COUNCIL

The WC started as an idea with two CEOs, Rich Meeusen and Paul Jones from Badger Meter and AO Smith respectively. The idea gained momentum with staff from other organizations securing the founding members; driving the focus areas of economic, technology, and talent development; and defining the water technology industry as a cluster. After becoming a member-based non-profit, the council spun out of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, which incubated the idea, and found a new office before the Global Water Center was even part of the vision. At the time, there were three full-time

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Global Water Center lobby.

staff. Since then the WC has grown to 10 full-time staff, numerous partners, 180 members, six global programs for water technology growth and soon to be a powerhouse at pulling technology out of federal labs and research labs all over the world.

In short, The Water Council and Milwaukee region have a special mix of people, location, industry, history, values, and bold leadership that make our city and state places that think about, know about, and care about water. This is at the core of what TWC is doing.

Situated along the shores of Lake Michigan, Milwaukee has deep, historic roots in the brewing industry and once was called the “beer capital of the world” with such brewers as Pabst, Schlitz, Miller, and Blatz. All of those breweries, except for MillerCoors, have ceased operations but their suppliers, the companies that made the parts including meters, pumps, and valves, have continued to flourish and grow. You could call this the perfect “economic concoction” for Milwaukee’s future.

Over the years, the companies that once manufactured the parts and pieces for breweries evolved into the now 200+ water technologies companies that form Milwaukee’s booming water technology cluster. These companies, just like the breweries, have deep roots in Wisconsin and vary from manufacturing of pumps, valves, meters, industrial water treatment processes, maintenance equipment, well services and products, big data and analytics, chemical and biological treatment products, and engineer consulting services.



Exterior of the Global Water Center on 247 Freshwater Way, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



AO Smith lab in the Global Water Center.

## THE BREW ACCELERATOR – A NATURAL FIT

The formation of TWC helped fill the need for the 21st century industry by leveraging Milwaukee’s history and attracting new technology companies with innovative and creative people. With a robust network in place, the opening of the Global Water Center, and the galvanizing vision as the epicenter for water technology

innovation, it was a natural fit for The Water Council to create the BREW Accelerator.

The Global Water Center (GWC), which houses TWC and the BREW, opened in 2013 as a place for “water-geeks,” as one TWC member so fondly describes it. The center houses two research facilities, three universities, over 15 start-ups, and over 20 other water companies and partners. It is central to an area in a Milwaukee neighborhood called Walker’s Point and now the hub of a new Water Technology District, which is home to a 17-acre Water Technology Park, the water utility, and University of Wisconsin Milwaukee’s School of Freshwater Science. The economic growth and investment is over \$221 million of public and private funding since the opening of the Global Water Center.

The BREW Accelerator funds at least six startups per year focused on water and with commercialization potential. This first-of-its-kind place-based accelerator pairs a unique water-focused startup community with credible

## WORLD WATER DAY

On March 22, 2016 – World Water Day – the Obama Administration hosted the first-ever White House Water Summit to shine a spotlight on the importance of cross-cutting, creative solutions to solving the water problems of today, as well as to highlight the innovative strategies that will catalyze change across the ways in which we use, conserve, protect, and think about water in the years to come. As part of the Summit, the Administration called on institutions and organizations from all sectors to make new commitments to build a sustainable water future in the United States. In response, institutions and organizations made the following commitments, as reported and described by respondents.

[https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/White\\_House\\_Water\\_Summit\\_commitments\\_report\\_032216.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/White_House_Water_Summit_commitments_report_032216.pdf)



resources of the world water hub to help entrepreneurs from around the world accelerate results, inspire action to create further opportunity, and disrupt the status quo in a legacy industry. With the accelerator now starting its fifth year, Milwaukee is “brewing” water technology companies in Wisconsin to help solve world water challenges and bring new innovations to market.



*BREW winner Iconac pitches in the Innovation Pavilion at the Water Environment Federation's Technical Exhibition and Conference.*

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The first BREW Accelerator applications were solicited worldwide in 2013 and since then 32 winning companies (see table) have moved into the Global Water Center. In the past year the program expanded to include a corporate track for partners looking outside of their corporations for innovations. In 2016, as part of the White House's first ever Water Summit, numerous organizations made commitments to solve water problems and create new business opportunities. The Water Council made three commitments at the Summit; specifically, the BREW committed to launch 75 water technology start-ups over the next five years. The goal is ambitious, worthy, and real! The BREW is an award winning accelerator. It has won a state award, Wisconsin Innovation Award; a national award from the State Science Technology Institute (SSTI); and finally IEDC's Gold Award for Entrepreneurship.

## A STARTUP SUCCESS STORY

As TWC looks ahead, it sees success and growth for its BREW Accelerator portfolio. A great example of the world-class people and innovations occurring in the BREW is Microbe Detectives, a first round BREW winner. Microbe Detectives went through two rounds of judging from an outside global panel before being selected. Founder Trevor Ghylin, who had recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin - Madison with a Ph.D. and P.E. in civil and environmental engineering, had just worked his way through the initial judging process into round two with two water business ideas. The global team of judges knew the importance and the uniqueness of finding a coachable founder, and Ghylin was it.

The judges shared their first piece of advice, which was to focus on one business at a time and Ghylin listened. Soon after, he won the BREW Accelerator and launched Microbe Detectives with the \$50,000 grant supported by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation. In addition to the money prize, winners also receive office space for 12 months in the Global Water Center, start-up sessions for six months with BREW coaches in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and access to TWC's robust network of water mentors and experts.

Microbe Detectives accelerates the adoption of DNA sequencing technology in the water industry. Throughout Ghylin's time at the Global Water Center he participated in every session, pitched at numerous events, and won the Rice Business Plan competition at Rice University. He is the kind of “pitcher” that puts the crowd on the edge of their chairs and has you watching everyone else's reactions in the room. One of the investors was about to make an investment on the spot in the meeting, and Ghylin actually said, “I am not quite ready.”

Though it may seem at odds to not be venture-ready, Ghylin knew he was not ready. He needed to refine his business model, team, and partners, all of which is part of the BREW Accelerator process.

By graduation, Ghylin had completed his customer interviews and pivoted to ultimately focus on water and wastewater, and he was generating some revenue. It was not enough to live on just yet. Again, listening to advice (often founders take advice too late), he needed to build out his team. As he moved forward to build his work team, he partnered with John Tillotson, a former chief marketing officer for Phigenics, a water systems company focused on safety and efficiency. Tillotson, who was part of the TWC membership and looking for his next opportunity, had experience in building new technologies and spinning them out, along with extensive experience in marketing and branding. He reached an agreement with Ghylin and forward traction continued.

BREW PORTFOLIO	TECHNOLOGY AREA
Cadens Wisconsin	Designed a low head micro-to small hydropower, Near Net Shape (NNS) technology to turbine design and production.
CornCob Wisconsin	A membrane system with a patented cross flow velocity intended to eliminate conventional pretreatment and reduce operating energy
DMR International Illinois	Engineered the NOVEX-AMG™ family of additive systems that have demonstrated unique solutions for water filtration systems with the added bonus of using environmentally responsible materials.
Ecoli-sense Ontario, Canada	Creates biosensor technology for a monitoring platform for water quality and agriculture, including a prototype of a magnetic bio-ink E. coli detection system.
Energy Tech Innovations, Wisconsin	Developing a low-cost, water-based gas treatment method that will convert biogas into renewable natural gas, a greenhouse gas neutral fuel.
H2O Score, now STEMhero, Wisconsin	Software to connect people who want to reduce their own water and energy footprint with those who want to support efficient use of water and energy. H2O Score sold to their spin-out company, STEMHero, a water and energy education platform.
Hydrate Gel Filtration Brisbane, Australia	Developed a new ultrafiltration range separation technology using a gelatinous layer of aluminum hydroxide hydrate that enables simple, high rate and cost-effective production of filtered water.
Iconac Ontario, Canada	Provides total pipe assessment using audible frequency sound to assess wall thickness, stiffness, leak location and more without service disruption or excavation.
IX Power Colorado	Developed OrganiClear, a complete treatment train for produced water. It was developed and licensed from Los Alamos National Laboratory.
MetaMateria Ohio	Offers material technologies to clean water using novel and nano-enhanced materials that economically address challenges in water purification, while also recovering phosphorous and other reusable contaminants.
Microbe Detectives (MD) Illinois	A bio-technology company that has accelerated the adoption of genomic technology in water and waste-water testing and analysis. MD applies advanced DNA sequencing to identify and quantify nearly 100% of the microbes in a sample of water.
NanoGas Illinois	A game-changing water technology company that infuses nanobubbles of oxygen and other gases to support the recovery of oil and gas while recycling water.
Nanolytix Ontario, Canada	A global leader in rapid testing technology in the areas of water and air. Using smart connected hardware integrated with artificial intelligence for real time water detections.
New Works India/Wisconsin	Offers hands-on training for Water Management professionals using state-of-the-art lab equipment from Festo Didactic; training water technician for the world.
Nutrient Recovery Upcycling Wisconsin	A precipitation process technology that extracts nitrogen and phosphorus from wastewater in the form of high-purity fertilizers.
pHinding Solutions Wisconsin	Was a biotechnology company that created a “fit bit” for collecting data in the lab. Has pivoted out of water technology.
Pellucid Water Wisconsin	Developed an application of Dense-Medium Plasma for water decontamination that does not require chemical additives, membrane filters or ion exchangers.
Plasma Environmental Wisconsin	Developed a new way in which to reliably generate reactive ions in sufficient quantity to be useful, and to mix these in the aqueous media to provide clean water.
Pulsed Burst Systems Wisconsin	PBS is a patented low pressure large bubble provider for better mixing in the water and wastewater industry. The PBS mixer accumulates small bubbles over a period of time and rapidly releases a series of giant or Megabubbles.
OptickTechnik Illinois	Provides optical sensors and instrumentation for characterization of particulate systems with patent-pending laser scanning and image analysis technology. It enables more accurate monitoring and control of key particle processes in water and wastewater treatment.

(Continued)

BREW PORTFOLIO	TECHNOLOGY AREA
Oxymem Ireland	They solve intensive wastewater treatment with the Membrane Aerated Biofilm Reactor (MABR). A system to achieve incredibly high oxygen transfer rates (up to 95%) resulting in superior energy performance, lower sludge production, using less operator hours.
Radom Wisconsin	Designed instrumentation with Inductively Coupled Plasma to promote continuous, routine, challenging and in-situ measurements of toxic trace metals in water, wastewater, industrial processes, and food and drugs.
Rice Technologies Wisconsin	Designed a battery operated, non-contact, water leak sensor that is positioned in places where water leaks commonly occur. When a leak is detected, an alarm is sent to a receiver. The water valve supplying water to the apartment or home is closed, preventing any damage.
Safe2 Drink Illinois	Created an innovative handheld water sterilization device that eliminates the need for batteries and chemicals.
SofTap Ohio	A water-softening technology utilizing a proprietary, passive filtration system to remove dissolved calcium and magnesium bicarbonates that form scale in drinking and industrial water systems.
Solar Water Works Wisconsin	A solar water treatment system which uses a photo-catalyst to accelerate natural water purification processes, eliminating the need for chemicals or external power which cuts operating costs and easy to install.
SmartWaters British Columbia, Canada	Creating a system to increase city resilience by harvesting rainwater and holding it indefinitely in order to provide strategic reserves for all municipal water needs.
Vegetal i.D. France	The US office of a global company, Le Prieuré, invented and patented the HYDROPACK® system which was the first modular green roof system.
Water Resources Monitoring Group (WRM) Wisconsin	Addresses deficiencies in current agriculture water run-off monitoring programs. WRM created an agricultural hydrology monitoring program that provides low-cost, high quality data that aids accurate decision making to help increase farm profits and improve water quality.
Watrhub Ontario, Canada	A data mining and analytics company that delivers timely, tailored market intelligence on water and wastewater systems.
WellIntel Wisconsin	A groundwater level sensing system and analytics to have groundwater information and trends at your fingertips.
WISLAN California	Provides real-time Business Intelligence Services for smart water grids to manage non-revenue water and agriculture management.

Over the last year and a half, Ghylin, Tillotson, and others on the team have completed a major rebranding, repackaging, and “re-partnering effort.” Through the BREW Accelerator and TWC’s vast global network, this idea from a Wisconsin graduate student has launched into a revenue generating business tracking for new investments and growth in 2017.

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In addition, Microbe Detectives has launched an e-commerce site, secured five partnerships, and is thriving in Milwaukee at the Global Water Center. They have served clients with projects including membrane bio-fouling, legionella analysis, cooling tower water analysis, wastewater treatment troubleshooting, groundwater remediation, drinking water distribution system analysis, groundwater well characterization, and even beer and wine analysis.

## OVERALL SUCCESSES AND THE FUTURE

The BREW Accelerator has seen some exciting transitions and successes over the last four years, most notably:

- A \$50,000 two year convertible note replaced the traditional grant the winners received. As a result, there is more commitment from both parties, and TWC can grow a fund to reinvest in water start-ups. We can become shareholders, not just grant providers. This brings a new level of accountability to everyone involved.



- The \$50,000 is either a loan to be paid back within two years of entering the program or, with investment success, shares will convert at a 20 percent discount for a separate Water Council/BREW Seed Fund to reinvest in more water technology start-ups.
- The funds are supported by an innovative Seed Accelerator program from the state of Wisconsin's Economic Development Corporation. Results are reported on a quarterly and annual basis for up to three years.
- An expansion of the accelerator included several global water technology corporations as partners for the BREW Corporate track, A.O. Smith, Rexnord, and Veolia. Each has their own innovation and research program and partnered with the BREW to expand their reach and place these start-ups in the Global Water Center.

**A. O. Smith Corporation** is one of the world's leading manufacturers of residential and commercial water heaters and boilers, offering a comprehensive product featuring the best-known brands in North America, China, and India. The company was founded in 1874 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where today the company is headquartered. A. O. Smith employs approximately 13,400 men and women at operations in the United States, Canada, Mexico, China, India, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Turkey, which has the global reach to serve customers worldwide.

**Veolia** is a global environmental company focused on energy, water, and waste. Today, water, waste, and energy can all be recovered – transforming what is discarded into a valuable resource. Veolia embraces this future by developing access to, preserving and replenishing the world's resources. They do this by blending skills in operations, engineering, and technology with innovative business models, offering a complete range of environmental solutions to meet the challenges of cities, governments, campuses, businesses, and industries.

**Rexnord** water management designs, procures, manufactures, and markets products that provide and enhance water quality, safety, flow control, and conservation. The two major divisions include Zurn and VAG.

- Oxymem, (oxymem.com) part of the BREW 3 start-up portfolio, is a membrane company from Ireland that achieves incredibly high oxygen transfer rates resulting in superior energy performance, lower sludge production, and less operator hours. They received a significant investment from DOW Chemical Company and our note converted! The BREW Seed Fund is now a shareholder. In addition, they received another investment this year from oil giant, Saudi Aramco Energy Ventures (SAEV).
- Radom (radomcorp.com), also part of the third BREW start-up portfolio, is an instrumentation company from Wisconsin. They offer the next generation



*CornCob Inc., a BREW winner, showcasing their advanced membrane technology.*



*Radom Inc., a BREW winner, demonstrating their next generation of trace metal analysis.*



*SoftTap is the winner of the BREW Corporate powered by AO Smith.*

of trace metal detection with Inductively Coupled Plasma to promote continuous, routine, challenging, and in-situ measurements of toxic trace metals in water, wastewater, industrial processes, and food and drugs. They have secured a license from a major global player in instrumentation, have customer traction, and products started being manufactured in Q1 2017.

- Having Preferred Partners who are designated service providers close to the program is vital to success. These companies are in such areas as accounting, legal, marketing, data, etc.
  - GRAEF – engineering
  - Michael Best – attorneys
  - Nelson Schmidt – marketing and branding
  - Sage-Water – Executive-in-Residence
  - Watrhub – data analytics and market research
  - WIPFI – accounting services
  - Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation – Seed Accelerator Program
  - University of Wisconsin Whitewater – coaching, research, and interns
  - University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – labs and advising
  - Marquette University – labs and the Law and Entrepreneurship Clinic
  - University of Wisconsin Extension – federal grant application assistance
- The Global Water Center, the BREW, and other business development programs such as our Small Business Channel have helped to attract more start-ups and founders to the region. We affectionately call them “BREW Plus.”

In addition, the BREW has seen the quality and quantity of applicants increase along with growth in the geographic location of applicants. This is analogous to the fly-wheel concept from Good to Great by Jim Collins. The applicants from BREW 1 were nomination only and mostly from the Midwest and France. The inclusion of the French company was the result of a strong exchange collaboration that had developed over a couple of years with the Chicago office of UBI France. As a result of our partnerships and global reach, the BREW Accelerator is

Through TWC’s membership and program offerings, we have grown our talent base and startups have found top-notch business development people to add to their team through this network. Acting as a “magnet,” the Milwaukee region is attracting a diverse set of skills in technology, business development, and commercialization, all vital to the success of an idea becoming a business with a North American headquarters in Milwaukee.

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BREW winner OxyMem accepting check for \$50,000.

now attracting startups to the program from across the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, and numerous other countries.

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## LESSONS LEARNED IN THE BREW ACCELERATOR

While the BREW continues to evolve, grow, and launch start-ups, we have a few lessons learned to share.

- **Focus of the Start-up:** In the first round of applications, the judges’ team focused heavily on the product being innovative, new, and disruptive technology. We now focus heavily on the team, its network, and ability to commercialize.
- **Coaching Team:** It is vital to have a mix of experts and styles. We have one professor from University of Wisconsin Whitewater, Dr. Bill Dougan. He brings academic and real-life experience. In addition, he has a best kept secret – a photographic memory for every application! Our second coach is John Tillotson, CEO of Microbe Detectives. Though it sounds unique, it is another part of our secret sauce. Tillotson has experience with a water tech company spin-out and numerous other start-up ventures. The coaches hold the start-ups accountable for participation and their milestone completion.



- **Start-up Team:** This is essential to success. The founders are usually technical innovators. As they grow, they need to build out their team with branding, administrative activities, and just as important, sales, marketing, and business development.
- **Time:** In water technology commercialization there is a unique understanding of time. Although innovators know they are on the tipping point of a breakthrough system change in a legacy industry, they still must push through with “pure grit” to a successful launch of a business.

Similar to the beer brewing process where a carefully crafted combination of ingredients is needed to create the perfect pour, the BREW Accelerator creates its own unique pairing. By matching innovators with the needed training, talent, funding, research space, and demonstration sites in the heart of the most densely populated water cluster, the final product is revolutionary.

Finally, as a BREW judge, Dr. Barry Liner from the Water Environment Federation, once affectionately called me, “the BREW Master,” it does take a special concoction of ingredients – connections, capital, capacity, and communication to launch a successful start-up. Similar to the beer brewing process where a carefully crafted combination of ingredients is needed to create the perfect pour, the BREW Accelerator creates its own unique pairing. By matching innovators with the needed training, talent, funding, research space, and demonstration sites in the heart of the most densely populated water cluster, the final product is revolutionary. TWC has deep roots and loyal members across the city of Milwaukee, region, state, and nation, while reaching 22 global partners, making it one of the best places in the world to unleash and launch water innovations. The perfect economic concoction. 🌐

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