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AUTOMATIC *irrigation*

‘Smart’ devices can save money in commercial, community projects

By McClatchy-Tribune and Leader-Telegram staff

We’ve all seen it before: It’s an autumn day, the lawn is already soggy as the sprinklers do their thing and water runs down the street.

It’s the curse of the automatic sprinkler system that simply doesn’t know how wet the lawn is and when enough is enough. Now there’s a solution. “Smart controllers” are being used increasingly by homeowners, golf course operators, farmers and others to save water and money.

RainMaster Lawn Systems has installed three of the controllers in Eau Claire this season, including one at Wilson Park in downtown Eau Claire and another at the DeLong Middle School practice fields.

“The number of these water-saving technologies that are utilized will increase as we do our part to educate people on the importance of conserving one of our most precious resources,” said Paul Madsen, president of Eau Claire-based RainMaster.

The Center for Irrigation Technology at California State University, Fresno, is playing a pivotal role that could result in the technology being adopted more universally — testing and studying various water-control devices for the Irrigation Association, a national industry group. Funding also comes from the California State University Agricultural Research Initiative.

Fourteen “smart water application technologies” were tested at the center, and the results can be found at www.irrigation.org.

“We don’t recommend any particular brand. We don’t say, ‘Buy a Chevy or a Honda,’” said Diganta Adhikari, a database analyst with the center. “But we present the data on them so people can make their own choices.”

Adhikari said some of the systems use sensors placed in the ground to determine moisture levels. Another technology gauges evapotranspiration and automatically adjusts irrigation run times based on inputs that include rainfall, current temperature and historic water use. Once control is turned over to the devices, Adhikari said, there is no need for human intervention.

Luther Midelfort in Eau Claire has adopted a host of “green” considerations in its Emergency Services building scheduled to open this fall and in other areas of the facility. Water-saving efforts include automatic flush toilets and fixtures that require less water.

Greener Grass Systems of Eau Claire currently is installing a smart irrigation system at Luther Midelfort. The system will include a weather station that monitors a variety of data in determin-



ing irrigation amounts and frequency.

“(Smart controller systems) are mostly on the East and West coasts where water is more of an issue, but they’re fast coming this way,” said Kelly Sather, irrigation division manager for Greener Grass Systems.

Sather said demand for the technology has been slower in west-central Wisconsin because water is relatively inexpensive and area aquifer levels are strong.

“(Installing smart systems) is a bit costly, but as water costs eventually go up they’re going to be used more and more,” Sather said.

David Zoldoske, Center for Irrigation Technology director, said the devices can cut water use by between 30 and 40 percent. They’re particularly effective when used in late summer or early fall when rains come and users don’t

change electronic timers on their sprinkler systems, he said.

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Customers will see about a 30 percent savings in water with this type of control.

— Paul Madsen,
RainMaster Lawn Systems

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Above: RainMaster Lawn Systems installed “smart” irrigation controls at Wilson Park in downtown Eau Claire this season. **Left:** Andrew Bolt discussed the results of using a smart system to control the irrigation of plants at his home in Modesto, Calif. **Staff, news service photos**

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