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## Cascade Engineering, DeVos' Windquest Group revive water filter project for use in developing world

By Matt Vande Bunte, The Grand Rapids Press

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CASCADE TOWNSHIP -- Distribution and sales of a gravity-powered water filter are poised for a rebirth with the sale of the product rights from a charitable organization in financial distress to two private Grand Rapids area firms.

Windquest Group, a private investment fund led by former gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos, is teaming with Cascade Engineering Inc. to ramp up production and distribution of the HydrAid BioSand device.

The joint venture comes six months after the water filter was left out to dry when Spring Lake-based International Aid suspended operations.

Expanding with a nonprofit model is good as long as the donations keep coming in, Cascade Engineering Chairman and CEO Fred Keller said.

"But when that slows down, so does the project," he said. "It was discouraging to us to see that fall apart, but we were able to make new arrangements, and we're excited about doing that."

International Aid two years ago took on the filter, in partnership with Cascade, to drive clean-water efforts around the world. It placed about 25,000 devices in Honduras, Ghana and the Dominican Republic. While the nonprofit announced it was closing last year amid financial problems, the organization is in the process of retooling, said Tim Coan, International Aids acting chief executive.

Cascade Engineering this week said it has reached a deal with International Aid for rights to the filter and got a license from the Canadian inventor of the process.

Now, with capital from Windquest replacing the nonprofit donations, Cascade aims to reach its current production capacity of 250,000 filters per year.

"This innovative approach to making safe water available throughout the developing world makes sense on many levels," DeVos said in a statement. "We are pleased to provide a catalyst for a



The Rev. Myles Fish, left, then-president and CEO of International Aid, and Fred Keller, right, chairman, president and CEO of Cascade Engineering, demonstrate a 7-pound plastic BioSand water filter in 2007.

venture that has the potential both to save, and significantly enhance, the lives of millions of people worldwide."

Filters will be given away through nonprofit and government agencies including the U.S. Navy, but also sold to in-country entrepreneurs in what may become a more sustainable model.

The entrepreneurs, aided by loans or rental programs, would distribute, assemble and teach families how to use the simple filters, which use gravity to pull water through layers of sand containing biological organisms.

Jim Bodenner, who spearheaded initial local efforts to distribute a concrete version of the filter before working with International Aid and Cascade on a lighter, plastic version, said "the new joint venture creates the resources and the engineering expertise you need to really scale this thing up throughout the world."

"This is too important a technology to not do it in a big way," said Bodenner, a Rotary Club member who owns a senior living center in Rockford.

Bodenner will be executive director of a non-profit arm of the Cascade-Windquest venture that will work with Evanston, Ill.-based Rotary International and other non-governmental organizations to open pipelines for filter distribution.

Distribution centers are planned in Ghana, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

"We're taking a product made in western Michigan and installing it in another country where people need clean water," said Wendell Christoff, a Litehouse Foods owner in Lowell and president of the new Safe Water Team, Inc.

"We're focused in on using the Rotary connections. We've seen what Rotary can do worldwide through eliminating polio.