

GREEN HEATING: More efficient burner technology increasing in popularity

By A.J. BAUER
The Patriot Ledger

WEYMOUTH - The Wilkinson family likes to say it's in its third generation of "sucking soot," installing and repairing burners and boilers used for commercial and industrial heating.

But as energy prices climb, and as businesses grow more interested in limiting their carbon footprint, Weymouth-based George T. Wilkinson Inc. is seeing greater demand for a more efficient technology that reduces the soot the rest of us suck by producing lower emissions.

The device is called Autoflame, and according to company president Geoff Wilkinson Sr., it has grown from a one-client job in 1996 to comprise roughly 30 percent of the company's annual sales.

The Wilkinson company was founded in 1951 by Geoff's father George Wilkinson and from that point until the oil embargo of 1973, George Wilkinson said, not much changed in boiler technology.

"The equipment to burn oil and gas was not much different since after (World War II)," Geoff Wilkinson said. "All of a sudden, because of the oil embargo in '73, everybody started to wake up to new technology. That's how things evolved."

Enter the Autoflame, which was created in 1972 by London-based Autoflame Engineering Ltd. The technology, which improves combustion by allowing greater control over air and fuel levels, was employed to ease the pressure of the embargo in Europe, Geoff Wilkinson said, but was unavailable in the United States until the 1990s, around the time amendments to the Clean Air Act increased the demand for such emission-reducing technology domestically.

Around that time, Northeastern University, one of Wilkinson's clients, was looking to improve the efficiency of its heating systems. Geoff Wilkinson, who had heard

about Autoflame at a trade conference, suggested the technology might do the trick.

So in 1996, Wilkinson retrofitted Northeastern's boilers with Autoflame - an addition that Northeastern utilities manager Jerry Ziola said has saved the university nearly \$2.1 million in fuel and maintenance costs over the last 10 years.

"It basically improved efficiency around 7 percent - which is huge," Ziola said.

Perhaps as impressive, Ziola said, is the reduction in Northeastern's emissions. Over the last 10 years, the university has reduced its particulate matter emissions (which contribute to pollution such as smog) by 3.2 tons. It has also cut emissions of carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas, by 14,596 tons - an average of 1,460 tons per year.

When he first brought the Autoflame technology to the United States, Geoff Wilkinson said he figured his customers would gravitate toward the technology to save money. But he said concern over emissions has had an even stronger impact on sales.

"Never in the world did I ever think it would turn out to be (popular for) monitoring and controlling greenhouse gas emissions," he said.

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Geoffrey Wilkinson Jr. looks over an Autoflame control panel retrofitted to an older boiler at Northeastern University.
(GREG DERR/The Patriot Ledger)