
Space invention lands Oregon company in record books

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MYRTLE CREEK - The co-founders of Umpqua Research and their company are headed for the Space Technology Hall of Fame for water purification technology used on space shuttles and the international space station.

Jerry Colombo and David Putnam will be inducted Thursday, along with Umpqua Research, the company they founded in 1973.

The invention of their microbial check valve in the late 1970s helped Umpqua Research become a successful aerospace engineering company, said Scott Aker, Umpqua Research vice president.

NASA has chosen it as the drinking water disinfection system for all shuttle missions since the start of the shuttle program.

The beauty is in its simplicity, said Bill Michalek, Umpqua director of engineering services.

The device "does its job right every time," Michalek said, an important consideration in space. "When things break, it's a long way home to get it fixed."

The valve eliminates bacteria and viruses in contaminated water via an iodine-based system.

It also saves money. When it costs about \$10,000 to launch a pound of material into orbit, just about everything sent to space needs to be reusable, including water, Michalek said.

"Water is pretty expensive, because it's heavy," he said.

Colombo and Putnam are both retired. Colombo still lives in the area and will represent the company at the ceremony in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The Space Technology Hall of Fame was established by The Space Foundation, in cooperation with NASA, in 1988.

There have been 54 inductees who have "transformed space technology into commercial products that improved life here on Earth," according to a foundation release.

The water purification valve has been used in space, but also in Pakistan to aid earthquake refugees and in northern Iraq for villagers who lack safe drinking water.

Umpqua Research has 30 employees, Aker said.