

## Who Will Win the Race to Offer Alkaline Hydrolysis to Consumers?

**Mark Riposta, owner of death-care businesses in Maine, seeks to outdo Anderson-McQueen**

Mark Riposta, owner of several death-care businesses in Maine, hopes to become the first funeral home in the United States to offer alkaline hydrolysis to consumers.

“With any luck, we will have the first if not the second alkaline hydrolysis unit in place and functioning at our crematory in Searspoint, Maine, at our Maine Coast Crematory business, by the middle of October,” says Riposta, who also owns and operates Crabiell-Riposta Funeral Home, a full-service, traditional firm; Direct Cremation of Maine; and Coast of Maine Cremation and Funeral Service.

Riposta faces some serious competition, however, from Anderson-McQueen Funeral Homes in St. Petersburg, Fla., which has been working for some time to install a machine at its Cremation Tribute Center. The McQueens had thought they would have the first machine in the world to offer the process to consumers, but Aquamation Industries, based in Australia, already has an operational unit at Eco Memorial Park in Queensland, Australia.

Now, Riposta hopes to take away the U.S. bragging rights from the McQueens, who are working with heavyweight Matthews International to install the company’s trademarked “Bio Cremation” machine.

Riposta is working with ECO-Green Cremation System in Fort Myers, Fla., to install the unit. ECO-Green is just one more player in what seems to be a steadily growing field of alkaline hydrolysis machine manufacturers. Matthews International, which is partnering with the Scotland-based Resomation; Aquamation and BioSAFE Engineering also offer their own versions of an alkaline hydrolysis machine, and they all come with different price tags.

### Why Make the Investment?

The McQueens have invested about \$450,000 in its Bio Cremation unit and ancillary equipment, such as a state-of-the-art processor, drying unit, automatic loader and some solar energy components.

Riposta is not investing that much, but the \$185,000 he’s spending is nothing to scoff at, he says. In the end, he thinks it will be worth it. “I’ve been in funeral service 35 years, and I believe this process is the cremation of the future,” he says.

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Funeral Service Insider is published weekly 48 times a year by Kates-Boylston Publications  
Two Washingtonian Center  
9737 Washingtonian Blvd., Suite 100  
Gaithersburg, MD 20878-7364

**PRICE:** \$295/year

One of the best things about alkaline hydrolysis is that it does not pollute the atmosphere with heavy metals such as mercury or the carbon dioxide that is given off via flame-based cremations, according to Riposta. “This process completely eliminates all those questions because there is no smokestack,” he says. Another benefit is that the process uses 60 to 80 percent less energy than a flame-based crematory, Riposta says. “And I have two flame-based crematories, by the way,” he adds.

Over the past two years, Riposta has been asking families if they would like a new technology that uses less energy and doesn’t leave a carbon footprint, and the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. “I haven’t found a negative other than it’s a brand new technology,” he says. “I think we are going to find that in the next 10 years that it becomes popular because it’s the right thing to do, and because it will be an effective way to completely eliminate greenhouse gases that come from cremation.”

### **McQueens Still Hope to be First**

When we reached out to Bill McQueen with Anderson-McQueen, he reiterated that his firm decided to offer alkaline hydrolysis because it saw an opportunity to create another unique differentiator in its marketplace. “We feel our market radius will grow by being the only provider of this service in our area,” McQueen says. “As we analyzed the situation, we felt if we were the first in the United States to offer this process on a retail/commercial basis, it would gain us some powerful media attention.”

With that said, McQueen says he won’t be too upset if some other firm beats his own in offering alkaline hydrolysis. The national media coverage that should come with the honor will only be “icing on the cake,” he says. He adds, “We intend to move as expeditiously as possible, but at the same time not deviate from our plan or cut any corners. We feel we can still derive the benefits we are seeking. It has been quite some time since I read the old fable, but if I recall correctly, the tortoise was the ultimate winner over the hare.”

Like the McQueens, Riposta wants to be the first to offer alkaline hydrolysis to consumers, but it’s all friendly competition, he says. “Whether we are first, second or third, we are

### **What is Alkaline Hydrolysis?**

Alkaline hydrolysis applies a higher-than-normal alkalinity at a high temperature to speed up the natural decomposition process of tissue hydrolysis. It doesn’t release mercury, and it is touted as another form of cremation that is environmentally friendly.

Florida, Maine and Oregon have taken legislative action to allow members of the general public to opt for the process. Other states such as Minnesota and Colorado allow medical and veterinary institutions to use the process on cadavers or animals.

The alkaline hydrolysis process produces a liquid that contains amino acids, peptides, sugar and mild soap. This liquid can be dumped down the drain, and some have suggested the liquid could be used as fertilizer. The process also produces pure calcium phosphate that looks like solid bone. This bone, however, can be crushed, and it produces a fine powder that can be returned to families – just like cremated remains. The crushed calcium phosphate ends up being a larger quantity of material than families get from a typical cremation.

### **What Should We Call this Process?**

Proponents of the process are calling it another form of cremation because it is easier to get it approved by including the process in existing state cremation laws. Otherwise, you’d have to add a third method of disposition on every single legal document, Riposta says. “The smarter thing is to take the stance that it is a non-flame cremation, so you can simply redefine cremation itself by adding a couple of words (into existing legal codes),” he explains.

So far, only a few people – such as Buddy Phaneuf, president of Phaneuf Funeral Homes and Crematorium in New Hampshire – have taken issue with classifying alkaline hydrolysis as a type of cremation.

*Should alkaline hydrolysis be defined as a type of cremation or something new? Write to [tparmalee@katesboylston.com](mailto:tparmalee@katesboylston.com) to let us know what you think.*

one of the first in recognizing this technology,” he says. “(The McQueens) run a first-class operation, and for them to take that step – it speaks very highly of them.” He adds, “Our industry is changing, and the people who are willing to look at these new opportunities will be the people who have everything that families need.”

### **Manufacturers Competing for Business**

While the Ripostas and McQueens of the world are eager to offer this technology, it isn't cheap. A traditional flame-based cremation unit normally costs \$80,000 with installation, and a nice upper-end model might cost about \$125,000, Riposta says. That compares with the \$185,000 he's spending and the \$450,000 the McQueens are spending.

But there are benefits to offering alkaline hydrolysis, such as the energy savings. “Also, the flame-based units need to be completely rebricked every five years or so,” according to Riposta. “That costs anywhere from \$14,000 to \$18,000,” he says. An alkaline hydrolysis machine would have minimal maintenance costs, he contends.

Rick Kost, vice president of sales for ECO-Green Cremations, expects to have about a dozen machines installed at various locations by the end of November – although we must note that in the past, companies and firms have been overly optimistic in setting timeframes tied to alkaline hydrolysis offerings.

“Our product is made in Cincinnati, versus Matthews' product being made in Scotland,” Kost is quick to jab in. “We provide a 10-year warranty on our product, and nobody else does that.”

Kost notes that ECO-Green Cremations was founded in November 2009, and the company makes multiple units – one for pets and hospitals, another for funeral homes and a higher-volume machine that handles about 2,400 pounds at a time. One pet unit is operational, and four more pet units will be operational soon, he says. “We handle the permitting and approval process; you don't leave that up to the client,” he says. “We have a chemist and a wastewater engineer.”

McQueen, however, feels he's working with the best in the business in Matthews International. “We understand who BioSAFE Engineering is, but other than our funeral directors having received some direct mail fliers from ECO-Green, we don't know who they are at all,” he says. “We picked Matthews because they are an extremely well-known and respected player in the funeral/cremation marketplace.” He adds, “In fact, a big part of why we ultimately decided to venture down this new uncharted trail was because we could have a trusted partner like Matthews Cremation Group helping to guide us along the way. We wanted more than just a good equipment manufacturer. We wanted a company of professionals who understood the cremation consumer and could help us in marketing this to our potential clientele.”

### **Looking Ahead**

Riposta expects his alkaline hydrolysis unit in Maine to be operational in the next couple of weeks, and McQueen notes that his unit has been sitting at a Matthews plant in Orlando, Fla., for a number of months because his firm still needs some necessary permits for installation. “Since the permitting review process is still taking place, I can't give you a definite date of installation, but I am certain it will not be by mid-October,” McQueen says.

The main issue for the McQueens has been getting the wastewater permit, and that has become frustrating, McQueen says. “From our initial meeting with our city officials where it appeared the permitting process would not take much time, things really have bogged down as more detailed reviews have taken place,” he says.

It may be that as Riposta seeks to get his unit installed, things will bog down for him, too. Either way, the hare and the tortoise seem confident that they'll both end up winners.