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Nearly Waterless Washing

Hotels, hospitals, and commercial cleaners do tons of laundry every day, leading to outsize utility bills and deluges of wastewater. Now Xeros, a startup spun out of the University of Leeds in Great Britain, is commercializing a process that replaces most of the water with rice-size nylon beads.

Mixed with mere squirts of detergent and water in the rotating drum of a modified washing machine, the pellets act like chemical magnets, absorbing grime and soap as they tumble over fabric. When the wash is done, the beads are automatically collected through an opening in the drum. After a few hundred loads, these get recycled, says CEO Bill Westwater. Lab tests show that the process matches industry standards for cleaning while cutting water volume by 90% and energy use by about 30%. Backed by some \$3 million in public and venture capital funds, Xeros aims to sell commercial units by late next year.

—Adam Aston

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