

Meet Jack Stevens
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In a continuing attempt to educate today's youth on the opportunities that are available in the water and wastewater industry at the local level, I sat down with part-time water operator Jack Stevens and discussed his thoughts on the profession. Jack was born in 1953 in Grant, Nebraska, and has remained in the area for his whole life. Jack graduated from Perkins County High School, and like many people just leaving high school; Jack was not sure where he was going in life. He attended night classes and took other higher education classes searching for his niche in life.

Jack has been running his own business for several years, providing complete grounds maintenance for several small cemeteries in the area. He had noticed that the Village of Elsie had been advertising for a water operator for six (6) to eight (8) months, and stopped at the Village Office one day to see what the job consisted of. The Village of Madrid had been covering as Elsie's water operator for a while, but they wanted to end the relationship due to concerns over liability issues. He learned that no one was willing to come work for the Village with a population of 139, and decided that he could help them out. Jack attended a Grade 4 water operator class in North Platte and became the system's certified water operator on June 1, 2008.

The original intent of the Village of Elsie was to have a water operator who worked twenty (20) hours per month. Shortly after taking the system over, Jack was confronted with the results of a sanitary survey of the system that contained three (3) pages of violations, many of them serious. Jack claimed he felt as though he was standing at the bottom of a large mountain watching an avalanche approaching. He felt overwhelmed and under prepared for the task he saw ahead of him. Jack met with Tony Martinez, his field representative from the state, and together they started working on correcting the deficiencies. He also contacted the Nebraska Rural Water Association (NeRWA), and received on-site assistance in completing required plans and other paperwork for the system. During this initial employment period, lasting approximately six (6) months, the twenty (20) hour months became nearly full-time as the numerous deficiencies were corrected.

One of the major challenges that Jack has faced since becoming a certified water operator was trying to determine the cause of the system's continuing coliform problems and taking the needed corrective action. After much investigation, it was determined that the most likely cause of the problem was gaps where the lid of the water tower met the sides. Jack contacted a water tower contractor and had the tower inspected to determine the extent of the problem. It was determined that the seal needed to be welded, and that several other safety concerns needed to be addressed at the same time. The system was able to have the work completed, and the contractor agreed to bill the system over a three (3) year period. A lack of records and incomplete billing data were other problems that Jack faced, and with the assistance of his state field representative and personnel from

NeRWA he was able to compile forms on which system records could be compiled and kept.

Now that the system is becoming more stable, the daily routine for Jack has also simplified. Jack generally starts his day by checking over the system to verify that everything is functioning properly. He then stops by the Village Office to check the Fax machine for digger's hotline reports and listen to any phone calls on the answering machine. He then goes to the post office to look through the Village mail to determine if there are any urgent or important letters needing attention. Following these tasks, Jack starts working on the areas of the system that still need attention, but are not a health hazard.

The rewards of the job come in the fact that most of the citizens of the village appreciate the work that he has done to improve the system and are understanding of the fact that much work still needs to be done and that it will take some time to get the system in tip-top condition. There is also a feeling of accomplishment in seeing the list of deficiencies shrinking to the point that they are no longer an avalanche, but only a trickle of sand down the mountain.

Looking into the future, Jack sees many other small systems having trouble hiring and keeping qualified water operators. With this in mind, he is considering the possibility of becoming the operator for other small systems in the area. This would need to be a gradual process, taking on smaller systems one at a time and determining if the workload is manageable. As the regulations governing water systems change, it seems to take more time for a system water operator to stay in compliance.

Jack recommends this type of work to anyone who is looking for a challenge and likes to work outdoors. Young people graduating from high school who want to stay in the area are encouraged to check out the local water and wastewater systems to see what opportunities are offered. Jack would be willing to take someone along on a routine day at work to see for themselves the variety of tasks and skills that are put into use in this field. New water operators are encouraged to become familiar with Word and Excel, as many state reports are in this format. It is also a good idea to find a mentor you can talk to and bounce ideas off of as you run into new situations.