

Whose Job Is It?

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Before any project can be completed properly, one question needs to be answered, and that question is: Whose job is it? This is true in our private lives, our business lives, our community lives, for our country, and even internationally. Most of the time this question can be easily answered, especially in our personal lives. It is my job to take out the garbage (if I am at home), mow the lawn, feed the cat and clean the litter box, vacuum the rugs and do the grilling as needed. My wife is in charge of most of the kitchen cooking, dusting and pulling weeds in the garden. Most of the other tasks in and around the house are shared. At work, job descriptions are usually used to indicate which tasks any individual is responsible for completing. When you get into community, national and international goals, it becomes a little unclear where the responsibility lies. Everyone seems to be willing to be responsible for the “fun” things that need to be completed, but it can be hard to find someone willing to be responsible for the difficult projects that need to be completed. The same question needs to be answered when it comes to Source Water Protection (SWP) as well.

The easy answer to this question is that it is the water operator’s job to complete and implement a SWP Plan. This is the same water he is responsible for pumping out of the ground and delivering to our taps, right? While this is true, most water operators will be quick to inform you that with the current regulations they need to comply with, they do not have the time necessary to complete a SWP Plan. In addition to this, the area involved in protecting the community’s Source Water for the long term usually extends beyond the corporate limits of the municipality. This makes it difficult if not impossible to implement a strategy that calls for any mandatory limits on the use of property within the SWP Area.

The next logical step is to place the responsibility for a SWP Plan on the governing body of the municipality. They have the ability to pass ordinances that can extend beyond the corporate limits in many cases. Governing bodies also have the ability to budget funding for any expected costs associated with a SWP Plan, including the printing of informational pamphlets, abandoned well decommissioning, conservation easements, etc. However, most board members will be quick to note that they are at best poorly paid for the time they spend conducting the business of the community, and in most cases they have other fulltime jobs that need to have the first priority for their time. Many board members also lack the specific knowledge required to complete and implement a SWP Plan.

We could then look to the state government to be responsible for the completion and implementation of a SWP Plan. The truth of the matter is, though, that the state does not have the manpower to complete this for every water system in the state, and the expense for the personnel to do this task would be passed on to the taxpayers or to the water systems themselves. In addition to this, the state personnel have no personal knowledge

of the local conditions that might apply to the development of a SWP Plan. These might include whether or not the community is a livestock friendly area, what crops are locally produced, whether there are plans for industrial or commercial development in the area, etc. These conditions all need to be taken into account and addressed during the SWP process. Besides, we all know how efficient government is when it comes to addressing local issues.

The next place we can look to place the responsibility is on the public in general. After all, they are the ones who are drinking the water, and it is their children and grandchildren who we are trying to protect with a long term SWP Plan. This makes the best sense, but once again we run into drawbacks. If the governing body of the municipality does not have the knowledge needed to complete and implement a SWP Plan, then the general public is not likely to possess that knowledge either. Most citizens are concerned about the quality of the water they drink, and there are many who would be willing to help protect it, but they just don't know where to start or what to do.

This brings us to the conclusion that it is everybody's responsibility to protect our drinking water source. Each of the entities named above have the knowledge, authority or ability to complete a portion of the task at hand, and in combining all of the available talents and skills, a workable and successful SWP Plan can be completed and implemented. The water operator knows what contaminants need to be avoided in the water supply and how they are likely to get into the source water. The governing body has the ability to set boundaries for the SWP Area and pass ordinances to promote best management practices within those boundaries. They also have the ability to budget funds to be used for Source Water Protection. The state government has already delineated SWP boundaries for all public water systems in the state and has compiled lists of possible contaminants from their databases that can be used as a starting point for completing a potential contaminant source inventory. Local citizen groups can be used to promote protection of our source water and also best management practices within the SWP Area. Speaking to these groups at their regular meetings is an excellent way to dispense information on protecting our drinking water into the future.

To assist in the educational portion of Source Water Protection, NeRWA has groundwater models that can be borrowed to show the flow of groundwater and the means by which it can be contaminated. We also have Nitrate test kits that can be used to test domestic farm wells, irrigation wells and area stock wells to determine the nitrate content of the water in the vicinity of the SWP Area. Global Positioning System units are available for citizen groups who would be willing to complete contaminant source inventories for their water system. NeRWA personnel would be willing to come to the system and train the citizen groups or water operators in the use of any of this equipment. To borrow any of this equipment or request assistance in any of these endeavors, call the office at (800) 842-8039.