

THE VALUE OF WATER AND THE WATER OPERATOR

By Doug Buresh, Circuit Rider #3

It's great to be back as a circuit rider for Nebraska Rural Water. Although only a temporary position, I look forward to working with many of you in the coming months. I had the privilege of meeting several of you while I served as an ARRA circuit rider in 2009 and 2010, and while teaching the chemical feed pump classes last year. I will mainly be working with our valve exerciser this year. I will also be available to assist with your ARRA reporting, vulnerability assessments and emergency response plans.

The name of this article is "The Value of Water and the Water Operator." What would your community do if it lost its water system? Everyone knows how essential water is. In fact, we can't survive without it. Everyone desires a dependable supply of safe, clean drinking water and they want it cheap. But the problem is it's not cheap to produce a dependable supply of safe, clean drinking water. We are required to meet high water quality standards. We all sample our water on a routine basis, and many systems need to disinfect and/or treat their water to ensure it is safe to drink. Much of our infrastructure has reached the end of its useful life and needs to be replaced. This also needs to be included in the cost to produce your water. I recently read an article that stated the average infrastructure replacement cost for large water systems is estimated to be \$100 per household per year. What really caught my attention is that for smaller water systems, these same costs are \$400 to \$800 or more **per year**, for each connection, just to replace the aging infrastructure.

Let's not forget the people needed to operate these systems. What would your community do without your water operator? Water and wastewater operators are professionals. We are required to hold professional licenses to practice our professions. In many small systems, operators do not receive the compensation, or the respect, that they deserve in relation to the scope of the responsibilities they carry out every day. An article which recently appeared in Reader's Digest named "10 Jobs Americans Can't Live Without," ranked water/wastewater treatment plant and system operators second behind registered nurses. Operators; this is a two-way street. We need to project a professional image if we want to be treated as professionals.

As asked earlier, what would your community do if it lost its water system? What would it do if it lost its operator? What is the real value of water and the water operator to your community? To get started finding out, contact the Nebraska Rural Water Association for assistance with an in-depth rate study.

The following is a related blog written by Steve Wilson, Project Manager for SmallWaterSupply.org. For those who haven't heard about it, I encourage you to check them out at www.smallwatersupply.org. This website was developed in 2009 by the Illinois State Water Survey at the University of Illinois. They provide water and wastewater operators with a free online resource tool. The plan is to link every free document, computer program and webpage on the internet that might be useful to operators. It offers a wealth of free resources without advertising or subscription fees.

WORKFORCE AND THE REALLY SMALL SYSTEM

I was at a meeting last week with an operator who has 35+ years of experience. He was talking about the trouble some of the really small communities in Illinois were having finding someone to take over as their water operator. We all know there are workforce issues, the average operator is in his 50's, there aren't a lot of young people getting into the profession, guys leave for better jobs, etc. But from his perspective, what he said was something I hadn't really thought about.

IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD

I'm not quoting word for word, but he basically said that 40 years ago, a man was glad to have a job at all, and proud to have a job where he worked hard, helped the public good, earned an honest wage, all of those things. But today, a kid can get a job at a fast food restaurant, make as much or more money as a small town pays their operator, and get benefits on top of that. It's so true. I know of communities that pay a contract operator a few hundred dollars a month to be the operator in charge, and pay an assistant another couple hundred dollars a month to be there every day, flipping switches and taking chlorine residuals. No benefits and pay isn't close to providing a livable income.

IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO THIS

Rural America has it ingrained in their heads that water is a right. They don't want to pay for it. They don't really care about the process of getting it. They just expect it. That's the problem. The public, in general, but especially in small towns, has little understanding of how things have changed with water supplies in the past 40 years, before there was an EPA or a Safe Drinking Water Act. Rural America generally wants the government to just leave them alone. I know. I grew up there, too. Pipes have been in the ground since before they were born, so they have no idea of the manpower and costs associated with putting water or wastewater infrastructure in place. They only care that their water rates don't go up. Some people say they can't afford their water rates, but they can afford cell phones with data plans and cable television with premium channels. The problem is really one of public understanding of the value of their water. They have always had it. Nothing has changed for them, so why should it cost more.

THE PUBLIC NEEDS A DOSE OF REALITY

I have jokingly said to several colleagues around the country that what we really need to do is have a national turn off the pump day. Every water plant in the country should shut down for a day. Let's see what people think of their water then. Of course, I don't really think this would be a good idea, but the point is how do we get the general public, especially in communities where the operator and the value of water are totally undervalued, to realize how much safe water means to them? That's where we need to focus our efforts. Instead of being frustrated when someone complains about their \$20 water bill, give them the example of Walkerton where 7 people died and hundreds got sick because the operator chose not to follow the rules. Here in Illinois, a community chose to lie to the state about using an emergency well, which they were using illegally because they were trying to save money, only to find

out later that the well was contaminated with a carcinogen. The operator and mayor are in jail; the potential liability for the community is staggering.

THE SOLUTION IS NOT SO SIMPLE

Water and wastewater services are undervalued in many small communities. That has to change. That's not news. We all know that's the case. The hard part is how to go about it. Rural communities are close knit and they resist change. They are also fiercely independent, which many times eliminates the one good solution some small communities have, consolidating resources with their neighbors. The bottom line is that times have already changed, and small communities can either change with the times, or find themselves without a viable water system or operator. Our job is to get through to them and help them realize how valuable their water and wastewater services are.