

Highlights from the 26th Annual Conference

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A surprise Nebraska snowstorm help welcome people to the 26th edition of the NeRWA Annual Conference held at the New World Inn at Columbus on March 15-17, 2004. The snow slowed down some early activities, but by Monday afternoon the annual event was going strong with training sessions and exhibitions.

The six-inch snowfall that Columbus awoke to forced cancellation of the Trap Shoot that was scheduled for 8:00am Monday. 15 or so shooters managed to survive without getting to participate in this kick-off event. By late Monday morning most of the 43 exhibitors were in the building setting up their equipment and displaying their water and wastewater wares. NeRWA salutes the efforts and participation of all our Exhibitors, who help make the Conference a complete experience for conference-goers. Special thanks to GOLD Exhibitors, who made cash donations of \$500 or more to help support the event: Bartlett & West Engineers; Kirkpatrick Pettis; and Sargent Drilling Co. NeRWA is also grateful to SILVER Exhibitors (donations of \$250 or more) as follows: Layne Western; Maguire Iron; Miller & Associates; Mongan Painting; National Waterworks; and Utility Service Co., Inc.

Mitch Holtus, *Voice of the Kansas City Chiefs*, opened the General Session on Monday afternoon with a humorous and motivational keynote address. Other afternoon presentations were given by Steve Harrison of *Economic & Engineering Services*, Bellview, WA; Jack Daniel of *NDHHS*; Denise Brosius-Meeks, *USDA Rural Development*; and Mary Mindrup, USEPA Region 7.

The Annual Best Tasting Water Contest was held late Monday afternoon with the assistance of these notable judges: Alan Slater, *City of Fairbury*; Sherry Wirth and Robin Williams, *NDHHS*; John Ruckman, *Bartlett & West Engineers*; Bob Prohaska, *USDA Rural Development*; and Greg Bouc and Clancy Dempsey, NeRWA. The judges sampled the water entries of sixteen Nebraska public water supply systems, and determined that the *City of Gretna* has the state's best tasting water in 2004. Water operator *Matt Frey* accepted the award in behalf of the City. Gretna's water sample is now eligible to compete in the National Water Tasting Contest to be held at Washington D.C. during the month of April.

Following a great Bar-B-Que meal, well over 200 persons spent the evening in the courtyard playing casino-type games including blackjack, roulette and bingo. The games paid off generously for most everyone, and winners were able to cash in their script money for a variety of prizes provided by NeRWA at the conclusion of the evening. Thanks to *Sargent Drilling* for sharing in the fun with their version of *The Color Wheel*, and to NeRWA board members and staff for manning the games.

Tuesday, March 16 was bustling and busy conference-goers attended as many of the 22 provided training sessions as they could. The *Small System and Rural Water Round Table*

sessions were again very well attended. Other especially popular sessions were *Sampling*, presented by *Dr. Jerome King of Midwest Labs*, and *Leasing Your Tower Space*, presented by *Randy Moore of Utility Service Co.* Computer classes (Microsoft Excel, Internet and Email) taught by *Lynn Dvorak of Central Community College* and the computer garage conducted by *Barney Whatley* again provided the opportunity for all to keep up their computer skills. Special thanks to the *Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services* for furnishing the fifteen computers for these sessions, and to *Laura Hardesty* of the department for making them available.

Special guest and noon luncheon speaker Bobby Scott of Tennessee and *Executive Vice President* of the *National Rural Water Association* complimented all the water system people present at the NeRWA Conference for the role they play in delivering high quality drinking water to customers each and every day. Nationally, the majority of water use is supplied by SMALL water systems like most of those in Nebraska.

The highlight of each Annual Conference is the Banquet and Awards Ceremony—this year's event was MC'd by *NeRWA Board Member Tom Goulette of West Point*. The NDHHS presented much-deserved *Water Operator Of the Year Awards* to *Lynn Lerch of the Village Howells* and *Gary Thurlow of the City of Atkinson*. *Jim Heyen of NeRWA* also presented *Wastewater Awards* to the *City of Clarkson for the Best Mechanical WW Plant* and to the *Village of Dodge for the Best Lagoon System*. Congratulations to these individuals and systems for their excellent performance!

Banquet speaker *Ralph Hood*, a native of Georgia, delivered a hilarious program with a strong message entitled "*It's Clear On Top*," to conclude the banquet events on Tuesday night.

Many people were on hand at 7:00a.m., Wednesday, March 17 when the complimentary buffet breakfast was served. NeRWA's Annual Business Meeting followed, during which _____ and _____ were re-elected to three-year terms. Another twenty training sessions were well attended in the morning and afternoon, sandwiching the noon luncheon during which the *Honorable Lt. Governor David Heineman* discussed his role as head of *Nebraska Homeland Security*. By 3:30 p.m., almost everything was loaded for the trip home as attendees, exhibitors and presenters said good-bye to another great conference.

NeRWA is grateful those who prepared presentations; to the exhibitors; and most important, to all those who attended the Nebraska Rural Water Association Annual Conference from villages, cities and water systems throughout the state. We look forward to seeing you again next year at Columbus!

