

Beware of a Free Lunch

By Mike Stanzel, Source Water Specialist

Back in early February I got the privilege of accompanying Randy Hellbusch and Board Members, Tom Goulette and Larry Wennekamp to the annual water rally in Washington, D.C. This was my first time ever to see our nation's capital; so needless to say, I was eagerly looking forward to the trip.

This is a yearly event sponsored by National Rural Water which provides an opportunity for us to visit in person with our state's Congressmen and Senators. Our purpose is to ask for their continued support and their help to keep funding our programs. These meetings require us to look as professional as can be, so I did have to go purchase some nice shirts, slacks and ties, which was long overdue anyway.

Randy and I flew out on the 6:00 am flight and arrived in D.C. early on Monday. Randy having been there numerous times offered to be the tour guide. So we checked in to the hotel and set out to see as much as possible. I'm pretty sure on our journey we walked somewhere between 17-18 miles or at least it felt like it. Thus causing the start of a blister from the new shoes I needed as well. Monday ended in an early night as it was a very long day.

Tuesday came and was a full day with meetings scheduled throughout the day. So with the new dress clothes on, we headed out on another journey which after all was said and done, I think we walked another 15 or so miles. UGH!!!! Lesson #1: don't bring new shoes to D.C. (Also, I'm getting to the "Free Lunch" part.)

Sometime in midafternoon Tuesday between meetings, we found out that the water sample from Curtis, Nebraska, had arrived after being misplaced. During this water rally, National Rural Water also has the Best Tasting Water in the country competition. The Village of Curtis qualified for this competition by winning our state's contest held at our annual conference in March 2013.

After the last meeting on Tuesday, we arrived back at the hotel. Of course, I'm practically limping at this point due to the enormous blister on my foot. We were immediately approached by a National Rural Water staff member informing us that Curtis's water sample had made it into the final top 5 and we needed to have a representative at the luncheon on Wednesday. We had a little dilemma on our hands since we had a meeting scheduled at the same time at Mike Johanns' office.

So at dinner that evening, I thought, me being the "New Guy," I'd volunteer to attend the luncheon. After all, it's a FREE LUNCH, right? And it meant I didn't have to walk another 15 plus miles!

So the next day I walked into the banquet area where just about 300 or so well-dressed people were in attendance. I found a table and noticed several news cameras and reporters were also there. I was thinking apparently this best tasting water contest is a big thing!

As I'm eating lunch, I hear the Emcee on the loud speaker ask if there was anyone from Nebraska in the audience. So, of course, as I look around, I'm the only one reluctantly raising my hand. So he approaches me and said I have to come up to the stage in a little bit and talk about my water system. HUH? I GOTTA WHAT? So after I about choked on my pork chop, I put the smart phone to work. I contacted the operator at Curtis and got a brief description of their system.

Did I mention I have a HUGE FEAR of speaking in front of a bunch of people?

Well, I made it through that. They proceeded to bring out the judges and the 5 water samples and within 15 minutes they were ready to announce the winner. So as I'm sitting there thinking wow, what did I get myself into, they announced the winner. You guessed it, Curtis Nebraska! CRAP!!!! Now I was thinking I'd have to go back up there again and accept the award in front of all those people.

This time I was greeted with a bunch of reporters sticking cameras and microphones in my face. Well, somehow I fumbled through that fiasco. Dozens of people were congratulating me as I made my way back to my table only to see Tom, Randy, and Larry standing in the back just a laughing away!

So all in all it is was quite the experience but in the long run, I would not have changed a thing. But my advice to you all is:

"Be Careful of a Free Lunch!"