

What a Week!

By Pat Petersen, Training Specialist

As I sit here writing this article I am thinking back to what a great week we had for the Nebraska Rural Water Association's 43rd annual conference. The more I think about it, the more amazed I feel. On the verge of a global pandemic, operators, engineers, exhibitors, sponsors, presenters, and Department of Health and Human Services staff were there; everyone was there! For one reason, to support the Nebraska Rural Water Association! In my nine years of planning a conference, I feel that this conference was one of our best! Although everyone had other things lurking in the back of their minds, the show went on and it went well!

Tom Goulette, president of the Rural Water Association, greeted all attendees and introduced our Keynote Speaker, Mr. Don VanVeldhuizen from USA Blue Book. Don did an amazing job of relating to all of the operators and definitely let them know how important their jobs really are! Drinking water administrator, Sue Dempsey, gave an update of current regulations and the possibility of changes to come. The floods of 2019 were the next agenda item. Two area field reps, Dave Jundt and Rich Koenig gave an in depth presentation on how their areas were not only affected but actually devastated! Two operators that felt the unbelievable devastation also shared in the discussion. Jody Kaczor with Boyd County Rural Water #2 (also last year's operator of the year recipient) and Ken Swanson with the City of Auburn shared their stories of the floods. Thank you all, it was an eye opening presentation. Dennis Watts representing NeWARN finished our busy Monday. NeWARN is a vital tool used for small communities to share tools, equipment, and personnel in the time of emergencies or disasters.

After a delicious meal, everyone in attendance was invited to the Big Apple Bowling Center for a night of Fun. Miller and Associates took the lead in the planning of the fun night event. Other contributors were JEO Consulting Engineers, Sargent Drilling, HOA and Nebraska Rural Water. This event was well attended and everyone seemed to have a very good evening. A huge thank you to all who contributed.

Tuesday of the conference is always the "biggest" learning day for operators. Operators were given several choices of classes including water, backflow, wastewater and well driller hours. Six hours of continuing education can be accumulated on Tuesday alone. After the day of learning, operators were treated to a social hour sponsored by Core and Main. This social hour continues to be one of the best networking phases of the conference, as operators can sip on a drink of their choice and talk water and wastewater with whoever may walk by.

Following the social hour, the tables were set for a wonderful meal, awards banquet and some music. DHHS gave away two awards during the evening. Nate Taylor with PeopleService was given the Outstanding Operator award. The award was presented by DHHS Field Rep Tim Thares. Congratulations, Nate. Keep up the good work! The next award given was a special award to DHHS Field Rep Bob Byrkit. Years ago, Ralph Naber had nominated Mr. Byrkit for the outstanding operator award for his work at the Village of Nelson, but was unable to receive it

because he had just taken a new job as a DHHS Field Rep, which is the position he holds today. Recently Bob had announced that he would be retiring in May of 2020, so Ralph wanted to make the special award announcement at the conference. Congratulations, Bob, on your outstanding operator of the year award, but most of all, enjoy your retirement! We at Rural Water will miss working with you! Ken Swanson with the City of Auburn Utilities was given an award from NeWARN for Auburn Utilities' cooperation and hard work during the floods of 2019. Two more highly anticipated awards were left to be presented, Best Tasting Drinking Water and the highly sought after award, the Russ Topp Doing It Right award.

After a close race, the dust settled and the City of Franklin was named this year's "best tasting water" for the State of Nebraska. Congratulations to Drew and his crew. We will be submitting a water sample from Franklin in the national contest which is held in Washington D.C. in February of 2021.

Every year the Nebraska Rural Water Association gives a prestigious award to an operator that is "doing it right." The award is named after Circuit Rider Russell Topp whose motto was, "If you're going to do it, do it right!" This year's recipient was Mr. Andrew Ditter from the City of Genoa. It's always a pleasure to help Andy out when he calls. You're always going to learn something about our profession when you get to sit and visit with Andy. He is one of the best and very deserving of the Russ Topp Award. Congratulations, Andy!!

Following all of the award presentations, once again the Chad Lee Band took the stage. Chad and Keith can play some good tunes just to keep you tapping your toes, but calm enough to allow everyone to visit about their busy day.

Wednesday began with the annual business meeting and operator breakfast. By this time the COVID-19 Virus had gotten everyone's attention and was the talk of the breakfast. Although the pandemic was bearing down on the states, Nebraska operators stayed in attendance at the conference until the bitter end. As I refer back to my first paragraph, you were there for us, the Nebraska Rural Water Association, as we will be there for you. A very high percentage of operators are first responders with their local fire departments so once again, they may have been called to go on duty when they returned to their systems.

Not only the support of the operators for the association but the support within the association was very visible as Wednesday was winding down. After getting Salli and Amy safely on their way home, we had one more hour to finish up the conference. I personally had another thing on my mind. My son's basketball team had qualified for the Nebraska State Boys' Basketball tournament and I didn't want to miss anything. The last class of the day had just started and my co-workers, Mike Stanzel, Randy Hellbusch, Scott Finke, Charles Buckley, Barney Whatley, and Ken Halverson said, "Let's get this stuff loaded up so you can get out of here to support your son," and we did! This NeRWA team that I work with is second to none! I do owe an apology to all of the operators that were still there when I left. I didn't get to thank you for coming and wish you a safe trip home! Also, another co-worker that I'm sure would have made it possible for me to leave when I needed to is Mike Lucas. Mike was feeling a bit under the

weather but I'm sure once he gets to feeling better, we will see him at the NeRWA classes and conferences. We missed you Mike!

Finally, thank you to the exhibitors, sponsors, operators, presenters and co-workers for a fun, wonderful conference. We are a team, a great team! Let's all work together to get our state back to normal as soon as we can. Please stay safe, but most of all stay healthy!

Just for fun, my son's team received 3rd place at the boys' state basketball tournament.....Wow, what week!