

NONE OF US ARE GETTING ANY YOUNGER

By Randy Hellbusch, Circuit Rider

Some of the NeRWA staff and board members recently attended the National Rural Water Conference. There was discussion and seminars on a variety of topics relating to small water and wastewater systems. One of the sessions that I thought was of particular interest related to the changing workforce. Many of the managers and employees of small systems are nearing retirement age. The Federal Government estimates that 1/3 of the current workforce will retire in the next 5 yrs. AWWA did a study and found that water systems surveyed expect to lose 14% of their workforce in the next 5 years and 27% in the next 10 years.

This presents two problems:

- #1 How do we replace these workers that will retire in the next few years?
- #2 How do we capture the knowledge and expertise these people will take with them?

One of the biggest problems I see with the first question is compensation. Salaries in the water field are 25% to 40% lower than in other utility positions. This is very troubling to me. Our most precious natural resource and those that deliver safe potable water to our taps are paid less than any other utility. We can survive without electricity, gas, phone, cable TV etc, but we can't survive without drinking water. Much of the problem with this boils down to proper rates. When working with many small systems, the decision makers say that they can't afford to pay what is needed. In reality, they can. If people are willing to pay \$40 or more per month for cable TV, they should be willing to pay what it takes to keep their water system in good working order. The truth is, if you under value your product, the public will tend to under value your services.

The second question boils down to two parts. First, new people need to be brought on board in time to learn from those that are leaving. The next thing is documentation. This is where as operators and managers of water systems, we can make life much easier for those that come behind us. For example, if a new operator starts in January, and in August discovers the water use is up 200%, he isn't going to know if he has a problem or not, unless he can look back at historical usage figures.

The number one thing we all need to do a better job of is PUBLIC EDUCATION! Our consumers need to be made to understand the importance of a properly ran water or wastewater system. Consumers need to be made aware of improvements and changes in the system. They need to know the importance of these changes and the benefits to them. An informed public is much more acceptable to change than an uninformed public.

We are all going to have to do a better job of promoting our profession. That is the only way that the pay and benefits are going to get to where they need to be. That is the only way that we will be able to ensure everyone enjoys safe, affordable drinking water well into the future.