

# OPERATOR? TECHNICIAN? SPECIALIST?

A SCHOOL OF THOUGHT SAYS IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE JOB TITLES BY WHICH WE REFER TO THE PEOPLE WHO RUN WASTEWATER AND DRINKING WATER SYSTEMS

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**Sam Wade**

Sam Wade, deputy CEO of the National Rural Water Association.

It isn't just Wade's opinion: The NRWA and its state affiliated organizations have issued a proclamation that says they will endeavor to project the workforce position of operations personnel as Water System Operations Specialist and Wastewater System Operations Specialist in publications, reports and verbal communications."

Why make this change? Do people in the professions want it? And how will it make a difference? Wade explained in an interview with Treatment Plant Operator.

## **TPO: What is the reasoning behind promoting a change in the job titles of operations professionals?**

**Wade:** The purpose is to project the skills, knowledge and expertise that's required to do these jobs today. I got involved in 1972 in Belgrade, Minn., a little town of 800. That job was truly the definition of "operator." It was before the Safe Drinking Water Act, and my training basically was, "You turn this valve and open this up," and so forth. You couldn't get a job in this profession today with the limited skills I had back then.

Today the regulations are far more stringent, the technologies are more advanced, and there are legal liabilities involved. People in this industry today are much more knowledgeable with much more expertise. On the wastewater, they are the first line of defense in the protection of our lakes and streams. On the water side, they

produce a product that every human being consumes every day.

## **TPO: How did this initiative to change the job titles get started?**

**Wade:** As we looked at the Baby Boomers retiring in our industry, we saw a need to gain the attention of a younger generation toward the water industry as a professional career. Our 30,000 members are predominantly small communities. Large metropolitan systems are members, too, but we focus on utilities that serve populations of 10,000 population or less. We recognize that we have to attract a qualified workforce for the future. We started looking at this seriously about five years ago, and our proclamation for rebranding was completed last year.

## **TPO: Is this part of a bigger initiative to attract people to the profession?**

**Wade:** It is. For example, we're working with the Veterans Administration to make veterans aware of the potential for careers in our industry. Forty-two percent of our veterans come from rural areas. Coming back from Afghanistan or Iraq, many of them just want to go back home instead of to a major metropolitan area. Our states also do things independent of the national organization, such as job fairs and job networks. The change in titles is part of an overall initiative. It's a long-term proposition because we're really trying to change thought processes from "operator," which is ingrained in memory to "system operations specialist."

## **TPO: What is the problem with the term "operator"?**

**Wade:** There is absolutely nothing wrong with the term. The issue is how that term is perceived by people outside our industry. In our industry, we talk to ourselves and feel comfortable with the term. Outside, the perception of "operator" is someone running a piece of machinery. On both the wastewater and water sides, the work in our industry is much more technical than that.

## **TPO: How does the public perception of "operator" compare with the actual stature of people in the water professions today?**

**Wade:** The science, the math, the lab work, the understanding of regulations, the equipment and processes – all of that is very technical today, even in smaller systems. There is much more to it than turning valves and flipping switches. These positions >>>

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require professional certification by the states, and every state has its own criteria. A large percentage of people in the industry today have higher education degrees.

**TPO: How would this change in titles affect how people in the profession are referred to in statutes and regulations?**

**Wade:** It has no effect at all. I know some people in agencies and organizations don't embrace this because they think they'll have to change their statutes or publications. That's a misperception. It doesn't affect the certification process in any way shape form or fashion. In fact, it supplements and provides more credibility in certification.

**TPO: How did you arrive at the alternate title of "specialist"?**

**Wade:** NRWA, through our state affiliates, has professional people in the field doing training in source water protection and providing wastewater and water on-site technical assistance. These people have titles such as Training Specialist, Wastewater Technican and Source Water Specialist.

We decided to do a survey to ensure that we were headed in the right direction and to understand the impressions of the people actually performing the tasks and who would be expected to benefit from the change in titles. We conducted an online survey distributed through our state affiliates. We asked: *Which of the below do you feel would better attract a young person to consider the water and wastewater industry as a career?* We received 1,849 responses during the survey period of 30 days.

**TPO: What was the outcome of the survey?**

**Wade:** Of the respondents, 17.1 percent selected operator, 39.1 percent selected specialist, 33.4 percent technician, and 10.4 percent had no opinion. In the survey, we provided a definition of each title:

- Operator as a person employed to operate and control a machine.
- Specialist as a person who has a particular skill or knows a lot about a particular subject.
- Technician as a person whose job involves skilled practical work with scientific equipment, for example, in a laboratory.

**TPO: Now that you have completed the survey, what are you doing with the results?**

**Wade:** First of all, we used it to create the proclamation from our state associations. We also provided the results to other water and wastewater organizations: the Water Environment Federation, the American Water Works Association, the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators, the Rural Utility Service, and the Association of Boards of Certification.

Our state associations are beginning to take action. For

example, in South Dakota, the governor issued an executive proclamation on the subject. In Delaware, they've started review their statutes and changing their terminology, although, as I said, that's not required. Our Wisconsin affiliate, in all their brochures and training announcements, use the "system operations specialist" titles. So it's gradually building, and we hope it will eventually become a part of the industry vocabulary.

**TPO: You have stated that these new titles can help pull wages along. How do you see that happening?**

**Wade:** Through this process, we have heard several people say, "It's not what you call people, it's what you pay them." And to a degree that's true. But if the people who make the salary decisions don't respect the position, the salary levels are never going to go up.

**TPO: In sum, what do you see as the benefit of this initiative?**

**Wade:** There are great, dedicated people who provide a safe quality water supply that we drink every day and protect the environment through wastewater treatment. They deserve to be recognized for the critical services they provide to the public and for how far the industry has progressed over the years. As an industry, we need to project, outside our own circles, the skills, knowledge and expertise required to operate the systems that produce high-quality, safe water and protect the environment. 💧💧