



WHAT'S COMING AND ARE YOU PREPARED?

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Currently New York has approximately 2660 certified wastewater operators, running approximately 610 municipal wastewater treatment plants across our state. There are also 285 private/commercial/institutional facilities treating sanitary wastewater, with treatment systems that require a certified operator. These facilities will be in competition with municipal facilities to retain certified operators. Approximately one third of the operators obtained their initial certification prior to the regulation changes in 1994. By a best estimate, a third of those operators today are 50 years of age or older. It is safe to assume that a third or more of the operators currently certified will retire in the next five to ten years.

We have a growing concern with this issue due to a combination of operator retirement, difficulty in passing the national test for certification in this field, and the lack of interest from our youth in pursuing a career in the wastewater (and water) industry. We hope after you read this article you will have the same concerns.

One industry professional stated, "It will not take another 10 years for things to reach a crisis. Five years at the most. The operators will **command very large salaries** and be mobile. Can you imagine an operator in the north country worth \$100,000/year?" Are you prepared, are you thinking succession planning? If not, you should be. Your water and wastewater facilities are the biggest asset to your towns, villages and cities.

One small village in upstate New York just recently advertised to fill a position when their certified operator retired. The village ended up hiring a college graduate with some experience for \$20.00/hr., with no certifications. They now need to pay for the professional training school in hopes that this person will successfully pass the difficult national test for certification.

Combine this crisis with the issue confronting the municipalities to upgrade their treatment facilities to meet new permit requirements. The upgrades and new permit requirements raise the plant score of many facilities, resulting in a need for a higher grade chief and assistant operators. For example, the municipalities in the Chesapeake Bay drainage basin recently had phosphorus and total nitrogen limits added to their permits. These changes alone may increase the classification of many facilities from Grade 2 or 2A to Grade 3 or 3A. These municipalities will now need to obtain the services of a contractor to serve the role of Chief Operator until the current staff can become certified at the

Grade 3 or 3A level. This will take 2 years, increasing the demand for Grade 3 or 3A operators. Are you prepared to pay higher wages for a professional operator? Have you considered that the current professional you have on staff may be enticed by a neighboring facility who can offer more? If you aren't already thinking about this, you should be. There is going to be a competitive market for these certified professionals **and as elected officials**, you should be paying a fair wage and succession planning. Don't wait until the position is vacant and then look to backfill the position.

Pursuant to New York State regulations, 6NYCRR Part 650, the majority of the wastewater treatment plants are required to have a Chief and an Assistant/Shift Operator, so that they are appropriately staffed. Complicating the Part 650 requirements are the Civil Service requirements. Many municipalities have Civil Service requirements that all staff in an operator title must be certified at the plant grade level. This is the area where the biggest future need will occur. Many facilities want to hire currently certified operators to meet their Part 650 and Civil Service requirements. The reason is that it is expensive to train a new operator. For example, a Grade 2A operator must complete the 60 hour Basic Operation, 30 hour Basic Laboratory, and 24 hour Activated Sludge courses before applying to take the Grade 2A ABC exam. This is four weeks of training that may not be available regionally and the operator in training will need to travel, increasing the costs of training to several thousand dollars.

Back in 2011, the Water Environmental Federation (WEF) hosted the Operator Certification and Training Summit with over 40 participants including representatives from EPA, National Rural Water Association, Association of State and Interstate Water Pollution Control Administrators, the Association of Boards of Certification and many others. They were asked to participate as individuals reflective of their expertise and broad understanding of operator needs and interests. Similar concerns were raised at this summit.

Finally, to summarize this article in short, the pool of certified operators is shrinking, are you prepared?

New York Rural Water Association will be hosting several workshops in the near future across our state on Sustainable Management of Rural and Small Systems/Sustainable Utility Management. We encourage all certified operators to sign up for this class and bring your clerks and elected officials to these >>>

sessions. You will participate in a self-evaluation of your system and discuss the ten key management areas including product quality, customer satisfaction, employee & leadership development, operational optimization, financial viability, infrastructure stability, operational resiliency, community sustainability & economic development, water resource adequacy, and finally, stakeholder understanding and support. Under the management area of Employee and Leadership Development, we will cover the system recruiting and retaining a workforce that is competent, motivated, and safe-working. Discussion will cover opportunities for employee skill development and career enhancement, training programs in place and available to retain and improve their technical knowledge, as well as, job descriptions and performance expectations, etc.

Our first session was held in Coxsackie this past August and those present were glad they had participated and strongly agreed the information and exercises were very beneficial to them. When asked what did they like best about the workshop – many replied being able to hear what other municipalities had in common, the open discussions on putting priorities in order in moving forward with asset management planning.

In addition to the workshops, the Water and Wastewater Education and Outreach Committee, a partnership of public and

private organizations formed to protect public health and the environment by ensuring that water and wastewater systems in New York State are operated and maintained to be viable and self-sustaining, have developed two brochures that may be of use to you. “The Value of Water – What’s it worth to you and your community?” and the “Environmental Careers – Water & Wastewater Operators” are both available for download at <http://efc.syracusecoec.org/WWEOC>. The career brochure was developed to encourage individuals to consider careers in the water and wastewater industry and have been distributed to high school guidance offices, unemployment offices, and job fairs. Also we encourage others to attend career days at their local high schools and distribute the brochure. The Value of Water brochure is to help educate the public on the importance of water and wastewater services. Be sure to check out these tools available to you.

Next time, we will discuss Asset Management Plans, which is just around the corner. If you are going to be applying for any financial assistance from our funding agencies, you will need to be prepared.

Much of this background information was provided by Robert Wither, P.E., Section Chief, Compliance Information Section, Bureau of Water Compliance for the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. 💧💧💧