

Sustainability:

What does this mean and what should we do to guide our water and wastewater systems in a direction to achieve this?

by Richard Winters,
Circuit Rider 1



First of all, we have to understand that this word is a related form of the word sustain. As you will see below, the word sustain has several meanings. These were taken from an online dictionary:

sus-tain

1. to support, hold, or bear up from below; bear the weight of, as a structure.
2. to bear (a burden, charge, etc.).
3. to undergo, experience, or suffer (injury, loss, etc.); endure without giving way or yielding.
4. to keep (a person, the mind, the spirits, etc.) from giving way, as under trial or affliction.
5. to keep up or keep going, as an action or process: to sustain a conversation.
6. to supply with food, drink, and other necessities of life.
7. to provide for (an institution or the like) by furnishing means or funds.
8. to support (a cause or the like) by aid or approval.
9. to uphold as valid, just, or correct, as a claim or the person making it: The judge sustained the lawyer's objection.
10. to confirm or corroborate, as a statement:
Further investigation sustained my suspicions.

Sustainability

-Noun - the property of being sustainable. Ok the English lesson is over. For the purpose of this article I will try to concentrate on what this means in relationship to our infrastructure and facilities within our water and wastewater systems. Something should be referred to as being sustainable if it is being managed so that it is indeed sustained (restored and maintained over time).

Sustainability is like being pregnant or alive or dead. You either are or you are not, so relative sustainability is a not a valid concept. Something is either sustained or sustainable, or it's not.

So when people say something is "more sustainable" or "less sustainable" they probably mean one of the following things:

- that more or fewer things can be sustained
- a system is declining slower or faster
- there is a higher or lower probability that something will be sustained.

In order for us to be able to become more sustainable, we first have to identify all the components in our systems. We have to conduct an Asset Management Survey on all these things to see where each component stands in its life expectancy cycle. Once this is established, we will be able to target our future budgets to provide for the need of the maintaining or replacing of these items. In these economic times, it is no longer just a good idea to do this, it is absolutely necessary in order to survive. It should also be noted that most, if not all, of the funding sources available to us are now requiring this practice to be in place as an eligibility criteria.

Your role in this process as an Operator is critical. You have to keep in mind that a huge majority of elected officials that have the financial control over these things come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. Very few have the necessary knowledge of your plants or distribution systems to make educated decisions about them. This statement is not intended to be a dig toward these folks, rather a reminder of why it is so important that you, the Operator, have to take a more active role in educating them on these things. If you can prepare an Asset Management Plan that clearly, and in layman's terms, explains your system's present and future needs, your chances of getting the Boards approval will be greatly improved. The elected officials will also be more prepared to set your system's rates at a level that will accomplish these goals. In my opinion, this kind of fiscal responsibility will not only get you on the right track, but will also save your customers money in the long run.

I have been told that our New York Rural Water Association State Circuit Riders, Mike Batz and Morris Coolidge, can assist you with an Asset Management Plan as part of their program. For further information give them a call at: (518) 828-3155. Some of the systems I visit already do a great job with this concept and I commend them for this. If you are one of these and can reach out to a neighboring community and assist them with this, I'm sure they would be very grateful.

In closing, I want to give you my simple overview of all this. If you maintain what you have and replace it before it is either broken, or has no residual value, you are on a sustainable path. 💧