

DEC to Conduct a Comprehensive Survey of Wastewater Professionals

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In the Fall 2008 issue of *Aquafacts*, New York Rural Water Association (NYRWA) President Florence Braunius reminisces about retiring colleagues and ponders where the next generation of water and wastewater professionals will come from. As a certification program administrator, this conjures up some interesting thoughts and prompts two immediate questions. First, what is each utility doing to address staffing needs over the next 10 years? Second, what are the skills and personal qualities each will seek in these individuals?

To help answer these questions, and more, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Facility Operations Assistance Section (FOAS) plans to conduct a comprehensive survey of wastewater professionals in conjunction with the New York State Department of Labor during 2009. The Department of Health has been invited to participate to extend the survey to water treatment and distribution professionals.

Among the objectives of this survey are the following:

- Determine how many certified operators intend to retire in the coming years.
- Determine staffing needs of municipal wastewater treatment systems.
- Identify compensation ranges for operators at various levels of certification.
- Identify recruitment strategies in use by municipal treatment plant owners.
- Identify what skills are necessary for employment at a treatment facility.
- Determine what assistance DEC can provide with regard to staffing and skill development.

Essentially, DEC's aim is to assess the status of these professionals in order to make proactive adjustments to its training, development, and certification programs. DEC's "Five Year Training Needs Survey" will continue to facilitate delivery of training for wastewater professionals and DEC staff as it has for over 10 years.

Regarding the need for such a survey, anecdotal evidence for years has been suggesting that loss of key personnel would occur somewhere around the year 2010. This is not surprising considering that many senior level professionals began their career in the 1970's following passage of the Clean Water Act. Even FOAS will need

to make adjustments in its staffing to reflect retirements, necessary to ensure compliance with DEC regulation and policy. As staffing and other challenges arise, maintaining effective relationships with organizations such as NYRWA become more important.

The 2005 publication "Succession Planning for a Vital Workforce in the Information Age" (AWWA Research Foundation / WERF) highlights the generational change underway nationally in the water and wastewater profession as Baby Boomers retire. Among the findings in this publication:

A large wave of retirements will occur between 2005 and 2015

- Considerable tacit (undocumented) knowledge will be lost due to these retirements.
- Skills necessary for these utilities are in short supply, with forecast to be worse.
- Even though an ample supply of workers is available, the available supply of desirable workers is thin.
- Many government-owned utilities operate under personnel rules that limit the ability to implement succession plans.
- A majority of utilities will need workers who are more technically proficient than those they are replacing.

In these areas, the impact of this generational workforce change may be felt the most in small communities. In these, an operator is more likely to be dual-certified in each water and wastewater, perhaps even having additional duties in the public works department. He (or she) may even BE the public works department!

Small system administrators have the additional challenge to be effective in areas that larger systems can simply address by hiring additional workers. Areas such as process operations, financial management, human resources, training, health and safety, and public relations each typically fall upon one or two individuals in a small system.

Making the most of limited staff is what can separate an average system from those that excel. This is a challenge when 80% of the municipal treatment systems in New York State have three or fewer employees.¹ It then

¹ *Descriptive Data of Municipal Wastewater Treatment Plants in New York State, NYSDEC, 2004*

becomes increasingly important to consider how an aging workforce will impact your community and system. If only three employees work at your treatment facility and one retires, you then have a gapping 33% hole to fill, perhaps more if that individual took a specific expertise with them.

For more information on staff planning, you can consult these free publications:

- Northeast Guide for Estimating Staffing at Municipal Wastewater Treatment Plants, New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NEIWPCC). This document, available in Fall 2008, seeks to update the approach and information available in USEPA's 1973 publication "Estimating Staffing for Municipal Wastewater Treatment Facilities". This new document will be available for download at www.neiwpcc.org
- Need-to-Know Criteria for Wastewater Treatment Operators (NTK), Association of Boards of Certification (ABC). This document details the level of knowledge for a variety of tasks and is crucial in the development of ABC's certification

exams. NTK for this and other environmental professions are available for download at: www.abccert.org/examinformation.html

(Note of Disclosure: DEC contracts with ABC for its wastewater operator certification exams. Separately, the author is the current President of ABC and is a member of their Board of Directors.)

I welcome any comments, questions, or concerns you may have to improve the survey we intend to conduct. You may reach me by phone or at the email address below. While there is no guarantee that a specific question will be in the survey, we will make every effort to capture the essence of any similar questions. 💧

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