

Operators Wanted... and Keeping them Wanted

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In recent years I have noticed that there is a trend with water and wastewater systems across Alaska. Cities, towns and villages are having trouble filling and keeping qualified operators. Many of the operators from the oil boom years of the 1980s and early 90s are beginning to retire. Many of these operators have been with the communities and operating the same systems for 20 to 30 years. Many of these operators were actually employed by communities as the systems were built and brought online. So, in many cases the towns, villages and cities have never had to face the reality of finding and training a qualified operator for many years, if ever. I have also heard of several cases of operators, speaking with the people of the community, approaching retirement and warning them that time was growing nearer. I think in some cases the operators have been there for so many years that no one can imagine them not being there watching over the system. I was told many years ago that depending on the complexity of the system it might actually take years for a new operator to completely be familiar with all of the different aspects of each individual system. From actual experience I believe this to be a fact. Nationally there are more than 31,000 water and wastewater utilities in the United States. These utilities require more than 380,000 water and wastewater personnel to ensure safe drinking water in the U.S.

I think the economy of the nation and the state of the past 10 years has also played a huge factor in the difficulties of filling vacant or soon to be vacant operator positions. The recession that hit the nation in 2007 really hit many federal programs and budgets hard. Many of the support programs that for years had helped and assisted smaller water and wastewater systems with financial aid and technical advice were suddenly cut and or even eliminated. For a few years here in the State of Alaska we were somewhat immune to some effects of the national financial woes. That was until about 2010 when the price of oil dropped dramatically, which meant less money from the state programs that were left for water and wastewater support. What became a fact of life was that the communities had to bare most of the costs incurred with supplying water and wastewater services to the people living there. The costs just kept adding up and some communities had to make some very tough choices. In some cases, this meant cutting the wages and benefits that for years were an attraction to younger people to seek positions as a water or wastewater operator. In some very rare cases they could not even afford to pay the operators at all, meaning some operators filled the role voluntarily.

At this time, it doesn't seem like a week goes by that I don't either hear of or notice a system that is having trouble filling and keeping a water or wastewater position filled. Fortunately for everyone this trend has not gone unnoticed in recent years and it appears there has been some movement to correct these deficiencies and difficulties. Thankfully the Job Corp water and wastewater programs still exist and are giving students the training and education that they will need as a water operator.

Within the past year I have been made aware of two new programs going on not only nationally but locally in the State of Alaska. The first of which I would like to mention is the National Rural Water Association's "apprentice program" which was announced in November of 2017 by the Department of Labor and National Rural Water Association. This program is currently working on approvals and development in each of the individual states. We here at Alaska Rural Water will try to keep everyone here in Alaska informed as to the progress here at home. This Program will be tailored to the specific needs of water and wastewater operators. I think it is the goal of

everyone involved in this program is to create more opportunities for operators of all ages to find and work with the utilities and receive the training that they need to do their job effectively. Also, recently I was informed of a program that the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and the Northwest Arctic Borough were working on thanks to a generous donation from Red Dog Mine. From what I have been told and have read, the total cost of the program will be about \$1.8 million, which is funded through the Northwest Arctic Borough General Funds. Most of which will be set aside for paying operator labor costs. Also, in addition to the labor costs a substantial amount of money has also been set aside for the costs of heating fuel and heating costs. Maniilaq Health Corporation will also be contributing assistance with this program. There is a list of 28 eligibility criteria items for the community to meet in order to begin benefiting from this program. Some of these items include hiring both a local operator and back-up operator as well as meeting compliance requirements, just to name a couple. This program is also designed to decrease residential water and sewer rates by 2/3. The Northwest Arctic Borough serves the communities of Ambler, Buckland, Deering, Kiana, Kivalina, Kobuk, Kotzebue, Noatak, Noorvik, Selawik, and Shungnak.

I hope we will see more and more of these programs both nationally and locally to ensure the communities have hard working, dedicated operators now and in the future. As they have in the past.