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*Washington's newsletter for waterworks operators.*

## Succession Planning

# Building a workforce of future certified operators

*By Chris McCord, Operator Certification and Training Section Manager*

There were more than 70 people in the Sacajawea Room when I began my presentation on succession planning at the Evergreen Rural Water of Washington fall conference in August.

I wanted some quantitative information, so I asked everyone to stand, then those eligible to retire in one year to have a seat...about 5 to 7 did. Next, I asked those eligible to retire in two to five years to have a seat, about 20 to 25 did. Finally, I asked those who will be eligible to retire in 10 years to have a seat and only 12 were left standing.

Those 12 operators will be the managers, supervisors and lead operators for the industry 10 years from now. More importantly, we got a graphic depiction of what the water industry might face in the next decade.

After a short presentation, everyone discussed three questions about ways utilities and the state can ensure a viable pool of qualified waterworks operators is available to replace those who could retire in 10 years.

### How can we build a viable pool of future operators?

- Market the water industry in high schools as a career path.
- Attend military job fairs and career days at high schools and colleges.
- Look at the level of experience required for entry-level positions.
- Use satellite management agencies and contract operators.
- Implement school programs, such as field trips, work-study, job shadowing and junior achievement internships.
- Retired operators can mentor, serve as back-up operators, and provide training to other operators.

***"Succession planning is the process an organization uses to ensure that employees are recruited and developed to fill each key role within the company."***

### How's your water system preparing?

- Operators reach out to potential future operators (networking or mentoring).
- Internal recruitment offers to promote staff from within.
- Working with internship programs at local community colleges.
- Cross-training existing staff.



*Deni Gray, operator certification program manager, learning how systems are preparing for the future.*

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### What can the Office of Drinking Water do to help?

- Provide training for water system boards and commissions.
- Reduce the time it takes to promote from one level to another.
- Develop outreach materials water systems can use at high schools, colleges, and job fairs.
- Communicate! Keep *Water Tap* and *H2Ops* newsletters coming.
- Develop marketing campaigns to explain what operators do.
- Get new staff at water systems vested by trying to get them certified within two years.
- Talk to more colleges about possible careers in water.
- Facilitate improvements in the reciprocity process with other states.

Many utilities and industry stakeholders tell us future workforce is an issue and they believe that Health can be a leader in helping to develop solutions. We will continue to solicit feedback and ideas as we develop long-term strategies on this issue.



*John Strom from Lewis County Public Works presents his group's recommendations.*

## City of Richland's succession plan

*By John Finch, Water Manager, City of Richland*

Richland's water department could lose up to 54 percent of its staff due to retirements within the next five years, so they're planning how to handle the situation.

They expect to lose two of eight operations staff members, eight of twelve maintenance staff, one supervisor, and one manager.

Richland has a goal of having existing staff trained and certified to fill vacancies in key positions across the water utility in a temporary or permanent capacity as required. To achieve this, they're taking the following steps:

- Identifying existing staff with leadership interest and required basic functional expertise as possible candidates for filling leadership roles and key positions in the water utility.
- Developing selected staff as possible future utility leaders.
- Providing ongoing supervisory or management training.
- Assessing certification levels and beginning necessary training and certifications to ensure regulatory compliance. As senior staff members leave the utility, water system operating certifications will go with them.
- Assessing who is managing individual segments of the water system and submitting reports. Every program and report should have at least two staff familiar with maintaining programs and submitting necessary reports.
- Utilizing current staff certifications and abilities by implementing cross-training across the utility.
- Training potential supervisors and managers in administrative duties. Time spent on training is critical to get a potential candidate comfortable with a new position and to build support from coworkers.

## Congratulations, River Bend Water System



Jeff Johnson, left, eastern regional engineer, presents a Silver Certificate to Mark "Bubba" Scott, water systems manager, Pend Oreille PUD, at River Bend Water System in Pend Oreille County. The Treatment Optimization Program recently recognized River Bend Water System for achieving five years of continuously optimized performance. We regret that we neglected to include River Bend Water System among the Silver Award Recipients listed in the September issue of *H2Ops*.

# Longview turns challenge into opportunity



*Brian Steveson, meter crew lead, prepares the equipment for large meter testing.*

*By Jacki Masters, Utilities Manager, City of Longview*

The Longview Water Division went through several major changes in the past few years, not the least of which was changing from surface water to groundwater. These changes forced us to examine our job classifications and made us realize we had a shortage of certified personnel.

We had one certified cross-connection control specialist and—because there was almost no movement or possibility of promotion within the Division—there was little, if any, incentive for staff to seek initial certification or upgrade their certification. So, we began several new programs that allowed us to add a supervisor position and staff.

We defined crews that include at least one lead and one operator eligible for temporary upgrade in the lead's absence. Each crew has an area of responsibility, creating a sense of ownership and pride in their assigned facility or work. We also began a robust rehabilitation and replacement program for old and worn facilities.

These programs created some movement and promotional potential. Now, 100 percent of our field staff is certified. The staff is aware of the retirements expected over the next 5 to 10 years and several have requested approval to upgrade current certifications or obtain additional ones—demonstrating their interest in these opportunities.

## The people chose Kalama

*By Kelly Rasmussen, Superintendent of Public Works, City of Kalama*

In June, the City of Kalama won the People's Choice Taste Test and placed third in the "Best of the Best" Taste Test at the 2014 American Water Works Association Annual Conference and Exposition in Boston. The event is a face-off of regional winners from water tasting competitions across North America.

The city gets all of its water supply from the Kalama River. The water collects in a Ranney well before it goes through diatomaceous earth filtration. We then disinfect with sodium hypochlorite and adjust pH by adding sodium hydroxide.

We add sodium fluoride for improved dental care. The city maintains 12 reservoirs with a combined storage capacity of 2.5 million gallons covering 20 square miles of distribution within the city and the surrounding county.



*A highly decorated water system. Kalama's water crew includes, from left, Public Works Superintendent Kelly Rasmussen, Field Supervisor Chad Moon, and Public Works Technicians Travis VanSlike, Gary Griggs, and Daniel Woolford.*

## Need new talent?

### Tap into the Work Study Program

Recruiting good employees can be a challenge. The State Work Study Program allows you to try out potential employees before graduation and train them the way you would like. You can assess their performance on a low-cost basis, and then offer employment upon graduation if they fit into your organization.

When you hire a work-study student, the state reimburses part of the student's wages. To qualify, you must hire a college student who is eligible for State Work Study referred to you by one of the 56 participating colleges. In selecting employer participants, colleges will review the nature of the position, the organization's compatibility with the college's role and mission, and the work environment to ensure it promotes a positive learning experience.

Each college operates the program a little differently, so call the Student Employment Administrator at the college you'd like to work with. For information, visit the Washington Student Achievement Council at <http://www.wsac.wa.gov/state-work-study>



# High 5 Award



Doug Hale, environmental health specialist at Okanogan County Public Health, was reading a news story about the fires burning into Pateros when he saw a quote that piqued his interest. It said the public works department issued a voluntary boil water advisory because they lost pressure and thought it might take weeks to get satisfactory lab samples back.

“I’m a water system operator and I thought, ‘I could help them collect the samples, bring them back to our lab and process them, even though it’s a weekend,’” he said.

Power was out in the entire Methow Valley and Hale realized many other systems were probably in the same situation. He went to the office and called the affected systems. If he couldn’t reach them by phone, he drove to them to find someone who knew their status.

If they lost pressure, Hale explained how to issue a boil water notice and what samples they needed to ensure water was safe. “These operators were already working hard to restore service to their customers and now they had to deal with more regulatory issues on top of everything else,” he said.

If they needed help with backup power or system repairs, Hale called Mike Pendergraft, a circuit rider at Evergreen Rural Water of Washington. Pendergraft helped systems with water testing, disinfecting, and locating broken and burnt water lines.

“We had to visit most of the water systems because cell service was down and they did not have any means to communicate,” Pendergraft said. It’s worth mentioning that the highway to the Methow was closed, so they had to take the long route through Pateros.

“The most amazing thing that I witnessed through this disaster was the giving of time and equipment from surrounding communities and neighbors to help each other,” said Pendergraft. “Without them it would have been much, much worse.”



*High 5 to Doug Hale, right, and Mike Pendergraft.*

Hale praised the City of Pateros. “If they hadn’t issued their notice, it’s quite likely I would not have thought to provide assistance.”

## WETRC: Helping to prepare future operators

*By Scott Hemingway, Director, Washington Environmental Training Center*

For 40 years, the Washington Environmental Training Center (WETRC) at Green River Community College has prepared individuals to become water and wastewater operators and managers.

Congress knew there wouldn’t be enough qualified people to operate and manage the wastewater and public drinking water systems required by the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. So, both included a grant to establish an environmental training program in each state.

Green River Community College won the training grant in our state and began operating WETRC on the Auburn campus in 1974.

**WETRC offers Associate in Applied Science Degrees in Water Supply Technology and Wastewater Technology.** Both 90-credit two-year programs give students the background they need to operate and manage complex wastewater and drinking water systems.

Individuals with these degrees typically work at larger utilities that require Grade 3 & 4 operator certificates, and want to become upper level operators or managers. You don’t have to live near Auburn to earn a degree. We offer many required classes online. You can take classes not offered online at a college in your area.

**Certificates of Proficiency in Water Distribution Technology and Municipal Wastewater Treatment Technology.** Individuals with these 31- to 41-credit one-year certificates typically want a basic understanding of water and wastewater systems, so they can be more employable in the water and wastewater field. We offer most of the classes required for a Certificate of Proficiency online.

**Continuing education classes and workshops to meet professional growth requirements.** We gear these classes toward increasing the knowledge base of operators who already earned their certification.

For more information, please visit [www.wetrc.org](http://www.wetrc.org) or call 800-562-0858.

## Zella West, Manager, Nob Hill Water Association

# One woman's story "in the field"

What started out as a job working in the office, turned into a career as manager of a community water system with 11,000 connections and a staff of close to 20.

Zella West has worked at Nob Hill Water Association in Yakima for the past 25 years, with the last nine as the manager.

She started in the office and spent two years working in the field—taking on jobs such as laying mainline, installing meter services, repairing leaks, reading meters, and flagging. In other words, explained

*Zella remembers her time in the field as challenging and rewarding,*

*"There were times I didn't have the strength to move the fitting or the pipe. It took a while to figure out how to accomplish these tasks in the best way and without asking others to assist."*

*However, sometimes assistance IS needed."*

*-Zella West*

Zella, "I was covered in mud, dust, sweat, crawly things, and a few items that I would prefer not to remember."

So what does it take for a woman to be successful as a certified

operator? Zella says it's not "gender" specific. You need to be the "outdoorsy type," she explains, and you have to be ready to get dirty!

Zella says her job also gives her the opportunity to learn many new and different things. She became a WDM 4 in 1998 and a CCS in 1999. Just recently, she finished her master's degree in business administration.



## Women in the water business



Zella West, Nob Hill Water Association

The expected greater-than-average employment growth, and the significant effect of retirement, will create a strong demand for new operators to ensure public health and environmental protection, according to the Washington Environmental Training Center. We expect demand for water and wastewater system operators to grow by 20 percent between 2008 and 2018. "Opportunities should be best for people with mechanical aptitude and problem-solving skills."

There's been a recent push to get more young women interested in technology and science fields. One area that may be overlooked is the water industry. Managers should keep this element of succession planning in mind. Talking to school-aged females may be a good place to start.

### Resources available

If you're interested in attracting more female employees, see the resources on the right.

One and two-year certificates and associate degree programs in drinking water and wastewater technologies.

Washington Environmental Training Center, 800-562-0858, [www.wetrc.org](http://www.wetrc.org)

Washington State STEM Program (science, technology, engineering, and math), 206-658-4320, [washingtonstem.org](http://washingtonstem.org)

American Water Works Association, [www.AWWA.org](http://www.AWWA.org)

Access journal articles:

- *Women and Water: Making Waves in the Industry*
- *Workforce Diversity: Becoming a Woman Entrepreneur in the Water Services Industry*

Buy the book, *Recruitment and retention of Women into the Water Sector: Perspectives, Future Challenges*.

Learn about the 2015 Women in Leadership Symposium, Feb. 10, 2015, in Seattle.



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For people with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TDD/TTY call 711).

### Did you get your renewal?

We will mail certification renewals to operators on November 8. If you don't receive yours, contact Larry Granish right away at [larry.granish@doh.wa.gov](mailto:larry.granish@doh.wa.gov) or 360-236-3141.

Review the information on the form, make needed corrections, and return it along with your fee postmarked by December 31, 2014.

### Confirm your professional growth requirements

Most certified operators must meet their professional growth requirements by December 31, 2015. A year may seem like a long time, but the longer you wait the less likely you are to get the class you want. Check your status online at <http://www.wacertservices.org/>

**Want to be a contract operator?**  
Contact Willa Lawton at [willa.lawton@doh.wa.gov](mailto:willa.lawton@doh.wa.gov) or 360-236-3145.

### Upcoming Monitoring Deadlines

- Polymer reporting - Feb. 1
- 4th quarter chemical monitoring - Dec. 31 (Includes nitrate, arsenic, complete IOC, VOC, herbicide, pesticide, fumigants, and insecticide)

### Moved recently? Changed employers?

Report changes ASAP by email at [dwopcrt@doh.wa.gov](mailto:dwopcrt@doh.wa.gov) or online at [www.doh.wa.gov/opcrt](http://www.doh.wa.gov/opcrt)