

EPA Administrator Wheeler Addresses NRWA Members at WaterPro Conference



The keynote speaker for the opening ceremony at the recent 2019 WaterPro Conference was U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator, Andrew Wheeler. Wheeler is the first EPA Administrator to attend the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) conference. Wheeler addressed the challenges and issues facing the water industry and also gave high praise to rural water on the differences they are making in the water and wastewater industry. The conference was held September 9 – 11 at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

Next year the EPA will turn 50 years old. In 1970, 40 percent of water systems failed to meet EPA standards. Today more than 91 percent of water systems meet EPA standards. More than 300 million Americans receive safe drinking water from 50,000 community water systems and 91 percent of those systems serve less than 10,000 people.

“Every day you and your colleagues provide clean and safe water to millions of Americans. There are few callings as noble and as significant as that,” Wheeler said, “you deserve greater recognition and least of all, you deserve our thanks.”

Although much progress has been made, the EPA still has challenges to address. Wheeler stated, “We estimate more than \$700 billion is needed to modernize the United States water infrastructure over the next 20 years.”

Wheeler provided details regarding what EPA is working on to help address the challenges facing the water and wastewater industry.

Regulatory certainty

Wheeler stated that EPA’s regulations need to keep pace with science and with realities on the ground. It has been more than two decades since the lead and copper rule was substantially updated. EPA has to update the program according to the science. He also

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stated that it will take more than 20 years to replace all of the lead service lines in the country. EPA is committed to updating the rule in 2019 and committed to getting it done right. The proposed regulation should be out in October 2019 and there will be a notice of comment period. Wheeler urged attendees to please review and provide comments. "We want the rule to work for all of you," Wheeler said.

Wheeler also commented on the agency's work on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). The EPA is moving forward with the maximum contaminant level (MCL) development process outlined in the Safe Drinking Water Act. EPA will propose to include PFAS chemicals on the next round of the unregulated contaminant monitoring rule (UCMR). The agency is working on technologies and treatment options to remove PFAS from drinking water.

Workforce development

Wheeler stated that one-third of water operators will be eligible to retire in the next ten years. EPA supports workforce training and development and the agency also supports NRWA's Apprenticeship program.

Funding

According to Wheeler, 3,600 water systems across the country are currently in violation of health based violations and more than 50 percent of those systems serve less than 500 people. EPA has many resources available to help small systems with compliance. The agency has put funding towards grants that fund training and on-site technical assistance, state revolving fund (SRF) loans, and water infrastructure finance and innovation act (WIFIA) loans. Wheeler also announced a new grant program called the water infrastructure improvements for the nation (WIIN) act. These grants will be made available to help small and disadvantaged communities, beginning in September 2019.

Wheeler concluded his address by stating, "I'm proud of the progress we're making across the agency. We have challenges before us. But if the past is any indication, I believe we can address them."



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