

# The Ever-Increasing Challenges of Maintaining Certified Operators

**R**ecently I and other Kansas Rural Water Association board members and some KRWA staff attended the National Rural Water Association WaterPro Conference in Milwaukee. It was good to finally attend a conference in person instead of in a virtual setting like we have done in the past couple years due to COVID restrictions. A setting like the NRWA WaterPro Conference is a great opportunity to network with city administrators, city managers, clerks, and operators; the list goes on and on to discuss the many issues that municipalities and rural water systems face all over the United States.

On the national front there are many concerns about the standards that may or may not be set for testing for PFAS, (per- and polyfluorinated) or called the “forever



chemicals”, the new lead and copper rules that are in the works which will include replacement of lead service lines, which is a whole different animal on its own. BUT,

invariably the conversation will turn to an ever-growing problem on how to not only hire but to keep and retain operators to operate the water system and wastewater systems in the United States. This will become a real problem as the “baby-boomers” are beginning to retire and smaller cities and RWDs cannot replace them quick enough.

Kansas Rural Water has implemented the water and wastewater Apprentice Program to train operators not only on their system but to get them ready to take the operator exams in Kansas. It is a thorough course and includes bookwork and hands-on schooling. Many small systems and cities in Kansas rely on one operator to operate the water plant or well field, wastewater plant or lagoons, maintain

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the streets, mow the parks, etc. Many other systems rely on contract operators to be the registered certified operator of the water or wastewater system due to many reasons including lack of funds to pay a decent wage, which causes constant turnover of staff in these systems. In my opinion, KDHE is proposing new operator certification requirements that will upset the operator certification programs. The new proposed regulations will require that anyone who has a Class III or Class IV water license to obtain 15 hours of classroom training every two years. KDHE is also proposing a “new” distribution system license that would require more testing and an additional five hours every two years classroom training through a KDHE approved training.

Then there are the contract operators that so many systems rely on. The KDHE proposed regulations will require more stringent requirements for a city or RWD to even hire a contract operator. I feel this will make many contract operators just drop the system that they are trying to help. Where does that put the system? They will be without an operator and out of compliance.

Many operators have taken the exams and failed because the tests do not have questions on their particular system and they generally do not understand the workings of a different type of system. Training from KRWA is very helpful but it is hard to grasp the workings of a surface treatment plant if

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your system has wells and vice-versa. I have held a Class III water license since 1988 and a Class IV wastewater license since 1992. The new regs proposed will certainly make myself rethink being a contract operator for a couple small systems in northeast Kansas. Also, I don't understand the need for the addition of a distribution classification; it just becomes more

burdensome for the systems all around. This was proposed by some larger systems in Kansas that have a specific distribution crew to work on the distribution system only. That is not the case in most smaller Kansas cities and RWDs. This will not affect the small systems 500 or less but will have a major effect on systems serving 500 or more.

KRWA hopes that there will be some additional thought to these proposed regulations. If approved in the present form, the regs will add burdens to cities and RWDs concerning operator certification and make it more difficult to obtain a contract operator.

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*He was elected to KRWA's Board of Directors in 2014 and to the National Rural Water Association Board of Directors in 2016. He holds Class III water operator certification and Class IV wastewater operator certification in Kansas.*





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