

Water quality, operator training and YOU

by Iva Last, Executive Director, Manitoba Water and Wastewater Association

Are you committed to providing your community with the safest possible drinking water?

Are you doing your part to conserve the environment in your area of the province?

Do you know who is directly responsible and in charge of your municipal water supply, wastewater collection, distribution and treatment system facilities? Have these persons been properly trained? Do they have the knowledge and experience to operate these often times state-of-the-art facilities?

These are questions that municipal administrators and council members need to ask.

The primary objective of the **Manitoba Water and Wastewater Association** is to advance the knowledge, understanding and ability of the membership to successfully operate and maintain water and wastewater treatment facilities, water distribution and wastewater collection systems, and encourage through fellowship amongst the members, an exchange of information and experiences. It is our objective to help administrators and councillors to ensure that they do have properly trained staff.

There were a number of points that came to light from the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the safety of public drinking water in the City of North Battleford, Saskatchewan, by the **Hon. Robert D. Laing**, Commissioner. Some of these points were:

- The record keeping in the water treatment plant was primitive and incomplete.
- Two junior operators who had been hired, as well as one senior operator had not completed the basic correspondence course that was offered under the voluntary certification program.
- Though training events were being offered, operators were not attending.
- It was found that one-half of all operators working at that time in the Province of Saskatchewan had

attended one or no workshops during their careers, and in the case of North Battleford their operators were not participating in ongoing education relating to water treatment.

Some of Justice Laing's findings with regard to mandatory rather than voluntary operator certification were:

- An amendment to the regulations requiring a certain number of continuing education credits in order to be eligible for renewal certification would not only be a positive influence on operators, it would also put municipalities on notice that this requirement is non-discretionary and is a cost of operating a water treatment plant.
- A necessary corollary of making continuing education credits mandatory is making available the programs that will allow operators to qualify for such credits.
- That a mandatory certification program would be a positive step to improving the quality of drinking water in the province.

A further reason for the move to mandatory training of operators was to decrease municipal liability and to reduce public skepticism about drinking water quality/safety and environmental pollution. As most of you are aware, the public are demanding to be more informed on issues that affect public health. One of the roles of Council members, as well as Municipal administrators, is to decrease the public's uncertainty about the quality of drinking water throughout your communities.

Manitoba takes a pro-active approach:

The Province of Manitoba has taken a pro-active approach to the findings in both the Walkerton and North Battleford incidents. On April 22, 2003, the Province, under *The Environment Act*, passed regulation *M.R. 77/203 – The Water and Wastewater Facility Operators Regulation*. This regulation, among other things, will eventually require that all operators of a facility must be certified, that operating records will

have to be maintained, and that training requirements will be established.

At this time, basic training for operators in Manitoba is provided by community colleges in the province. These courses consist of introductory courses for new operators as well as examination preparation courses to prepare operators to write their Manitoba Certification Exams. These exams are based on the Association of Boards of Certification (ABC) criteria and are administered by the Province of Manitoba, through Manitoba Conservation. In order for an operator to write a Manitoba Certification examination, he/she must meet these requirements:

1. a passing grade on the examination;
2. appropriate work experience; and
3. the appropriate level of education.

The Manitoba Water and Wastewater Association offers continuing education units to operators at training sessions held at various locations throughout the province. In February 2005, our Annual Seminar will be held in Portage la Prairie, and we will again be offering a number of relevant training sessions for operators. At this event, operators will be able to earn continuing education units, take in the Trade Show featuring the newest products and services, and have a chance to exchange ideas and information with fellow workers in the industry.

Continuing education units are also available through the Western Canada Water and Wastewater Association.

California State University has correspondence courses available in all areas of waterworks, including a Water Treatment Plant Operation Specialist Certificate program.

The American Water Works Association offers a number of courses available through satellite conferences and web casts, specialty conferences, topic specific workshops, networking events and training courses.

The Province of Alberta, through the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton offers a Water and Wastewater Technician course in its curriculum.

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The Province of Saskatchewan, through the website www.SaskH2O.ca, lists a number of training opportunities that are now available, as does the website of the Water Environment Federation (WEF) at www.wef.org.

At the present time, most operators in Manitoba receive training only after they have become employed in a water or wastewater plant. It may be time for all involved in the operation of water and wastewater facilities to lobby the provincial government to set up an educational curriculum that would ensure professional standards for people who wish to enter the water or wastewater fields, as is done in most other trades.

A section of The Manitoba Water Strategy, under the newly created Department of Water Stewardship, states: *“For Manitoba’s Water Strategy to be successful we must develop effective, long-lasting partnerships among all Manitobans to secure safe, clean water supplies for our future. It is up to all of us.”*

We are all stakeholders in the quest to provide high quality, safe water. All levels of industry, government, interest groups and individuals will need to work together to meet this demand. ♦



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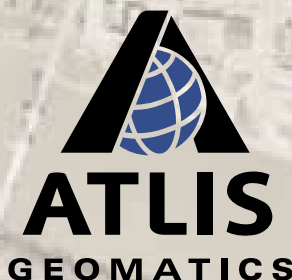
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