



Imagine a Day without Utility Operators

I often begin KRWA training sessions with a standard ad for our organization. I show off a few features on our website and show upcoming training opportunities. I pitch the Association's Apprenticeship and Mapping programs and then explain some of the work that KRWA Technical Assistants, Circuit Riders, Wastewater Techs, and Source Water Protection Specialists perform for water and wastewater systems across the state. I briefly introduce the group to the KRWA staff with a "Brady Bunch" style collage of our faces. Then I always show a series of photos. The photos start with an AP shot I took from an online story I read years ago while working at KDHE. It's set in a third-world country and shows a large group of men, women and children crowding around a water tanker truck with hoses and containers to fill and bring to their homes. This is a semi-tanker and a dozen people or more are on top of the thing wrestling the hoses. I then show a Boil Water Advisory from 1866 that "earnestly advises" boiling water during a cholera outbreak. A political cartoon from the same period depicts a skeleton pumping water from a handpump for a young family as "Death's Dispensary" is shouted from below in bold print. I often ask who thinks about problems with our water supplies in these ways, that the water problems are "third-world" or from this country's less enlightened times (if such times exist). I'd bet that many modern-day water

and wastewater utility customers think this way if they consider their water or wastewater utilities at all.

Then, I switch to a photo of a young woman carrying a large container past a line of other young men and women waiting patiently with their jugs and containers. But this is no third-world photo. These people are all "head-down" staring into their cell phones. They're wearing masks on their faces and modern clothes, puffy coats and beanies. They are carrying Coleman and Yeti coolers. The photo was taken in early 2021 in Austin, Texas. The citizens of the "#1 City of the Future" (according to *Forbes* magazine) were carrying water to their homes in buckets to flush their toilets. The city was shut-down due to an intense winter storm that many of us remember. I bet every ratepayer spent considerable time thinking about their water and wastewater utilities during that event. They noticed the service wasn't there when they needed it.

What's the deal with firefighters? Firefighters spend their days exercising, eating chili and washing their trucks, right? But anytime there is a structure fire, the news cameras are out there filming these brave heroes as they watch the structure burn down. A very, very small number of the citizenry is impacted daily by the local

fire department, however, they're the ones on the photo calendars and getting discounts at local businesses. That brings me around to my original line of thought. If the local fire department decided to boycott work today, how many people would notice a difference? How many days would it be before a majority of the population noticed the firefighters weren't on shift?

Let's put these same questions to the water and wastewater world. The water and wastewater operator world is where the employee is responsible for treating, storing and delivering on-demand clean, usable drinking water and then collecting and transporting the used product to a treatment facility, treating it so it can be usable again and sending it back into the environment. That's quite a sentence when you stop and re-read it. There is an individual or group of operators at each utility that is responsible for each citizen's health and safety. Every person (not just rate-paying citizens) who washes something, cooks something, takes a drink, flushes a toilet, or waters a plant is personally impacted by their water and wastewater utilities DAILY! Where are the calendars featuring wastewater operators (an idea I borrowed from a wastewater operator friend of mine; thanks Jamie!).

We need to take pride in our work. Although operators are taken for granted, the work is necessary and we should be proud to serve our neighbors and friends.



Water and wastewater system operators work in all types of conditions such as in this photo taken in a small city in north-central Kansas making a repair to a distribution system pipeline in February 2021 when the ambient temperature was -28°.



Utilities that operate mechanical wastewater plants conduct a range of tests every day. This operator is conducting a settleability test. The test is an analysis of the settling characteristics of the activated sludge, mixed liquor suspended solids (MLSS).

“Whoa, wait a minute Daryn! We don’t want to see a “Men of Wastewater” calendar! Operators aren’t paid to exercise like the fire department!” Okay, good point. Let’s move on from that topic then.

There’s an international movement called “Imagine a Day Without Water”. It’s a day set aside for reflection on the value of water. Participants are supposed to imagine going without water and reflect on how they can contribute to programs designed to promote clean and sustainable water supplies. A good program for sure. But what about “A Day Without Wastewater Operators”? One day without the operator might be okay; automated systems will call the lift station pumps on when needed. But eventually, a rag will end up in the lift station and the pump will grab and seize it. If the wet well fills, the pipes fill and the toilets won’t flush. That would be noticed. The utility customers may not consciously be thankful for the wastewater operator in their town, but they would definitely notice after a few days of the operator being absent. Wastewater collection and treatment systems are the MOST important contributor to community health and wellness. The ability for us to easily remove waste and the associated filth and disease from our

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households with the push of a lever is an incredible convenience that is taken for granted by almost every American.

How does “A Day Without Water Operators” sound? At my house, our wastewater is treated by an onsite treatment system. But my toilets, and every other toilet that exists, will not flush without water to fill the tank. In America, most of the water we use in our homes is for cleaning and removing waste. How many days of water does the system have if no one is there to keep the pumps running properly, find and fix leaks and ensure the water is disinfected so no one gets sick? It wouldn’t be very long before Kansans are standing in line at the tanker truck to fill a bucket.

I don’t intend to be a revolutionary and inspire any worker protests. But society would be in great peril without water and wastewater operators. I want, like the “Imagine a Day Without Water” people, to bring awareness to this industry and the good men and women who keep systems running every day. The people in this business do such a good job that their customers don’t have to think about it. That happens to be a blessing and a curse. The first thing we need to do is take some pride in our work. Although operators are taken for granted, we know the work is necessary and we should be proud to serve our neighbors and friends. Next, as an industry, we need to do a better job of creating awareness about water and wastewater operators and the good work they do, similar to firefighters. Because without us, even they couldn’t do their jobs.

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