

# Planning for customers – past, present and future

**T**he part of Kansas between Council Grove and Junction City has spectacular flint hill vistas of farm and ranch operations along-side newly built homes on smaller acreages. Mixed in are small Kansas communities with residents hanging onto their familiarities of knowing neighbors and doing some business in the ‘home town’— but mainly going to the city for entertainment and most of the farm and family shopping. This area covers parts of Morris and Geary counties and is the home of Morris RWD 1. Its management office is located twelve miles north of Council Grove in Dwight, Kan.

Morris RWD 1 is currently changing a little of that landscape with a system expansion project with BRB Contractors, Inc. of Topeka running two crews to construct 42 miles of new water main that adds more than 84 new water meters. Nothing unusual here. It’s what RWDs accomplish every year around the state.

What is unusual about this project is that it’s the second system expansion since Morris RWD 1 obtained original financing and finished that construction in 1994. Most rural water districts don’t approach system expansion in this manner. A more universal system approach is to ask developers, ranchers, businesses and homeowners to pay 100% of these expansion costs.

## Why start a rural water district

While sitting in the Morris RWD 1 office in Dwight, Kan. visiting with Shirley Hoch, office manager, Steve Euler, manager,

Bill Gustafson, Keith Morgan, long-time board members and Bert Zerr, KRWA consultant, I listened to an incredible history about the

including my husband Willis, got together with a steering committee in 1979 and soon incorporated the

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people and times that brought the system into existence.

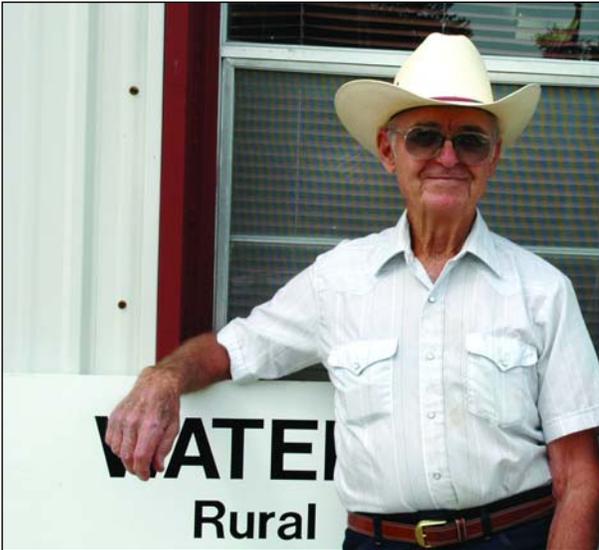
“A bunch of area dairy farmers, tired of hauling water and

water district in 1980,” said office manager Shirley Hoch. Shirley lost her husband Willis a year ago. He was key in developing the RWD



Standing in front of the Morris RWD 1 office in Dwight, Kan. are Shirley Hoch, office manager and Steve Euler, manager.

board and for over 12 years he served as RWD manager. From those beginnings, the fledgling board spent a dry and many times disappointing 10 to 12 years qualifying for and securing money



Bill Gustafson, Morris RWD 1's only original board member has served on the Board of Directors since February of 1980.

to build the initial 270 miles of water system.

"Why I got involved in all this was that I heard there was a group of dairymen who were trying to start a rural water district. I and one of my sons, who still leases pastures and fills them with other people's cattle, were hauling water everyday from the Junction City Municipal building – and paying them for it. All of a sudden they said, 'It's no more water for water haulers.' Word got out and at Ft. Riley they must have felt sorry for us because they opened up a hydrant right next to I-70 at Marshal Field. And we hauled from there. It was so awful hot that summer. They put up a tent and put two soldiers at the hydrant to turn the water on and off. They must have complained so much that they finally told us, "At the end of the month we're closing this hydrant down." Between the two shut-off dates it finally started raining a

little. And how we lived through those 10 or 12 years I don't know. But that's the reason I started looking into something different than getting water from Junction City. And I'll never forgive them, or I won't forget it, I'll put it that way," recalled Board Member Bill Gustafson.

#### Chasing the money

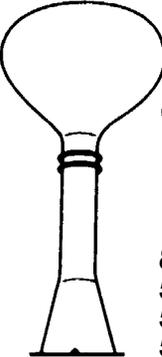
Those early years saw government agencies and other lenders turn down the newly formed RWD for loans and grants many times over. Morris RWD 1 was either too wealthy, didn't have enough members, or was spread out over too large an area. The current Morris RWD 1 map extends into four counties: Morris, Geary, Wabaunsee and Lyon. The system will have over 330 miles of water line and 575 meters (that number is still growing) when the current phase III project is finished.

"Lowell Miller was a dairy farmer, original board member, firm believer in rural water and good spokesman for Morris RWD 1. In 1990 he made a trip to Council Grove to meet with



Willis Hoch, resigned as board chair in 1990 in order to take the RWD manager position that year.

Senator Bob Dole. Bob was on a constituent tour and was spending part of the afternoon at the Hays House restaurant," said Bill Gustafson. "Lowell was passionate



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about our need for water and was able to talk to Senator Dole about our predicament of there being no grant funds available. Things started happening after that.”

30, 1991. The \$5.7 million loan and grant paid for 270-miles of water line, a booster station, two wells, standpipe and tank.

**Left:** Keith Morgan, long time Morris RWD 1 board member, is also project inspector working with the BRB Contractors rock trencher crew. He was inspector for much of phase I back in 1993. “This current project is 40 miles of pipeline – but seems like 39 miles of solid rock. We had this one pasture, flat as a pool table, half-a-mile of solid rock. When they went through, it was ground to powder – only made 200 feet in a day. The 350 horsepower diesel was smoking and groaning, burning a lot of fuel too,” said Keith.

**Center:** The chunk of sharp edged flint rock held by Keith, “Can lay against a PVC pipe and with years of water vibration, cause a leak.”

**Below:** A BRB crew member hand fills the trench with earth that lays against the pipe, pulling out the larger pieces of rock that could settle against it.



It wasn't long after that meeting, that staffers from the Senator's office started calling Willis Hoch to gather information in order to get the funding ball rolling. Senator Nancy Kassebaum's office became involved shortly after that and further helped expedite the process.

In early 1991, much coordination and communication took place between the District, engineer, and FmHA to craft a system that would be financially feasible. Alternatives and options were explored to help reduce the cost or spread the cost among participating entities to achieve a reasonable monthly user rate that FmHA would be comfortable with and affordable for the users. FmHA, the Rural Water District, and Congressional representatives worked in closely to ultimately find the configuration that helped make the project a reality.

The good word finally came from Senator Dole's office on July

### Finally getting started

“To finalize the original funding request, we had to have 350 members signed and documented,” noted Shirley Hoch. “Back then, when we were first incorporated and were asking people to buy water units they would say, ‘Our well water is fine, why should we pay for a hookup to rural water and then pay a monthly bill?’ They wouldn't even consider rural water.”

“I had a neighbor who had a good spring in a close-by pasture. So when he built a house, he piped water from that spring to a reservoir under the house. He bragged on always having good water – didn't need rural water. Around that time repairs were made on Milford Dam and engineers had to lower it down to work on the spillway. At the same time, State workers were fixing a spillway at the State Lake near

Herrington and had to lower that lake level too. My neighbor called that week and said, ‘when they did that work on those lakes I lost my spring water flow – it's only running a half-a-gallon a minute.’ I told him that I guessed he was just plain out of water! He called back the next morning to ask, ‘Could you take a check for a meter right now?’ He ended up buying two meters – put the other across the road,” said Bill Gustafson. “Not everyone in the area agreed with us originally, but those feelings slowly changed.”

## Finding and taking care of the water supply

**W**hen Morris RWD 1 first started building a customer base and finalizing the first Farmer's Home Administration grants and loans, it started looking for a good water source. "It was hard to find a water source – they talked to every city and water owner around the area," explained Steve Euler. "They ended up finding a great lease north of I-70 and just east of Fort Riley's Marshall Field."

"Bob Vincent was our hydrologist consultant at that time and the District worked with him closely in finding and bringing the well-field online," noted Bert Zerr. "His company, Groundwater Associates, assisted the District in testing 12-13 areas in that field. The District's three wells are on Kansas River bottom land and are relatively shallow, each with a 500-gallon per minute capacity."

"I grew up two miles south of Dwight and one thing about this district always amazes me. My family lived on a spring. Anyone around our place that hit a well that made 5-gallons a minute had a gusher," exclaimed Steve Euler. "To be associated with our wells up north that can pump 500 gallons per minute continues to be just unbelievable."

Bob Vincent's advice was to super-chlorinate the wells on a regular basis. "The reason we do this is because of an iron and manganese problem where the metals attach to the casing, inlet screens and pumps. By shocking it with a thousand parts per million chlorine solution, those deposits are cut loose and can be pumped to waste. This keeps pump and lines clean, allowing them function at capacity," explained Euler. "We do this every six months."

"Willis and I originally struggled with a two-ton truck and a 1,000-gallon tank. It usually took us a whole day to do one well," he added.

"You should have seen those two trying to come up with a solution. They just hated doing that job," laughed Shirley Hoch.

They came up with a little trailer and designed a layout with a pump to mix the chlorine with water. The design uses a much smaller tank and valve system that makes it a much easier and faster process.



*Steve Euler with the portable "Super-Chlorinator" trailer, pump and tank unit.*

"It's a tool that makes it easier to do and when it's easier to do, you don't put it off, you get it done when it needs to be done. One well can be done in about two hours," said Euler. "Our three wells are close together with a piping system that connects all three. We chlorinate all three wells from one location but separately, one at a time."

"A while back a check valve was removed that had been in there for four years. It was in just as good of shape as the day it was installed," added Euler. "I guess a little planning and regular maintenance pays off in the long run."

## USDA Rural Development loans & grants received by Morris RWD 1

| Year            | 1993         | 1997       | 2005         |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Miles of line   | 270 mi.      | 14 mi.     | 42 mi.       |
| Loan amount     | \$ 2,405,700 | \$ 205,400 | \$ 808,800   |
| Grant amount    | \$ 3,296,000 | \$ 132,900 | \$ 423,700   |
| Total financing | \$ 5,701,700 | \$ 338,300 | \$ 1,232,500 |

**F**or each of the system improvements in our history, you have to back up a year or two from each finish date to accomplish paper work from all the different areas. The folks at the FmHA, now USDA Rural Development, get to know you very well during this process," said Shirley Hoch. "Our representatives guided us through

each segment, keeping us on the right side of those deadlines."

"Morris RWD 1, Staff and board members are a pleasure to work with. They have taken a proactive approach with expansion projects, while ensuring customers continue to receive water at reasonable rates," said Dan Fischer, Area Specialist, USDA Rural Development.

"We had a few people back then who didn't want rural water till they saw the trencher coming over the hill," exclaimed Board Member Keith Morgan.

"That's too bad. They just don't understand how systems are designed up front and you can't over design water main sizes because of financing restrictions," explained KRWA's Bert Zerr, who is recently retired from KDHE. "The theory is that you don't overspend in one area to the detriment of another, or let one system speculate and not another. Systems can't gamble with government money for prospective customers down the road."

"That's our problem now. We're trying to correct things that should have been done when we started but we couldn't because there wasn't any extra money available. Many of those original lines should have been upsized then but Farmer's Home rules wouldn't let us," said Bill Gustafson. "The rules wouldn't allow a six inch line a few years

ago and shortly after that time it was needed. We just didn't have the money to do it ourselves."

With the new project, many Morris RWD 1 lines have been upsized and now provide capacity for many new customers. The Morris RWD 1 Board will vote to pay the difference to upsize lines if they have the money and know there will be customers there in a few years.



Another critical element in this process has been the Board's make-up of ranchers and farmers including Willis Hoch, who was a dairy farmer when he started as RWD manager. Willis and his board had the know-how when it came to getting easements and communicating to those whose property was to be crossed by Morris RWD 1 pipelines. During construction of the entire 330 miles of line, only two parcels were crossed using the RWD's powers of eminent domain.

"Way back when we first started the first project, Willis always did this. He went out and visited with the landowners about easements and to let them know about the coming project. Willis was a farmer as most of them were. He was flexible, and not demanding. Nothing worse than getting someone angry," explained Shirley Hoch. "Steve Euler is doing the same good job at this now."

"When we have a water leak, and you call to let members know what's going on, they just don't rant and rave about it. They've just



**Left:** Steve Euler stands next to the splice that Larson Construction assisted with after heavy rains washed out the line that runs under Slough Creek.

**Above:** The washed out line can be seen at the right of the photo, just above the guard rail. The spliced line was run over the Slough Creek bridge and was spliced again into the west side main, close to the backhoe at the left side of the photo.

been super,” said Shirley Hoch. “The 12 years we’ve been providing water, we hear the phoning at the first sign of trouble.”

“I’ll second that,” said Steve Euler. “We had several customers call to say that their meters were not working – they could have waited a couple of months to call us. That was very nice of them. Another customer called to say that our north tank sprayed them as they drove by. It had a bullet hole in it, an apparent victim of a drive-by shooting. It was leaking pretty bad. Our customers help us keep an eye on things.”

“We’ve got a good manager – when we have a leak they get it fixed quickly. One of the last ones, a while back, was when the big rains washed out a section of pipe going under a creek and the high water wouldn’t let us get to the break to fix it. They spliced into the main on the east side of the creek and ran a temp line over the bridge and spliced back into the main on the west side of the creek,” said Bill Gustafson.

“We did get that one fixed but not until the next morning,” added Steve Euler. “We’ve only had two times since ’93 that customers went overnight without water and that was one of them.”

“In that leak and so many other everyday emergencies, we’re assisted by some very good vendors that always seem to have a crew available. It was Larson Construction, from Manhattan, who came right away to help us splice around that leak. They never put us off and always come as soon as possible,” said Shirley Hoch. “Also, Merlin Frahm, our BRB Contractors representative, dropped what he was doing and helped Steve do the valving that isolated that leak the afternoon it was reported,” she added. “Without such great vendors we’d be at a loss. So would our members.”

Things along State Highway 57 between Dwight and Junction City have changed a lot since the hot, dry summers of the early ‘80s. Morris RWD 1 pipelines now serve customers from southeast of Council Grove (the RWD buys water from Council Grove to serve customers clear down into Lyon County), north through Morris County through parts of Wabaunsee County and up into Geary County. The communities of Parkerville, Alta Vista, Dwight and Skiddy are all now served by the district.

Real estate people will as a matter-of-course now call the Morris RWD 1 office to get information as to line locations to properties that are for sale. Many people buying property will now only do so if the land is close enough to affordably hook up. New home buyers always ask for rural water. It didn’t used to be that way. Now water availability and water safety is getting to be the norm for all new residents in Morris RWD 1 territory.

“When we first started the District in 1980, we didn’t know much about the business at all,” remembered Shirley Hoch. “We learned as we went along. Kansas Rural Water helped us from day one. Circuit rider visits helped deal with technical problems, master meters were tested. Elmer helped us with different business issues. Training gave us skills and confidence. Gary Hanson even met with our board about FLSA issues. The Association has been a big part of helping us learn along the way.”

A generation ago the Morris RWD 1 farmers and ranchers who organized the RWD had a dedication to infrastructure that has carried over to a new generation. That new generation of water users

PHOTO BY BRAD REYNOSO, MORRIS RWD 1



*A beautiful vista of the Flint Hills is evident as a BRB Contractors trenching crew traverses ranch property along Avenue G in Morris County.*

coming aboard since the area’s dairy businesses declined, includes a new diversity of water customer: agriculture, past city dwellers, military, new businesses and retirees. These new members are all now enjoying the endeavors of Morris RWD 1 organizers and current board members.

Many of these original board members are gone. But just as many are still on the job, working to construct new pipeline and are patiently keeping a list of those who live a little too far away, but are still wanting rural water. These applications are kept in a file in order to make a case for finding loan money for the next expansion.

Phase IV already has a file at Morris RWD 1, and those folks in the file are kept up to date, as Shirley Hoch would say, “With what’s happening with things, how long it may take, and did you know how long it took to get this far?”