

The Links That Bind Us

By Shawn Stevenson

We all aspired to be something great when we were children, whether it was the President of the U.S.A., an astronaut, or mayor of your home town. The path that leads us to where we end up can be curved and rocky for some and straight and narrow for others. There are many factors that lead us to where we end up. But is there more to where we end up than personal choices that we make along the way? When we start down a path, certain factors take hold. At some point choices start to fade with necessity and responsibility taking a firm grasp on our direction. The vast majority of people in the water business take pride in their work; this is rightfully so. Water purveyors are not only responsible for the maintenance of the system but the health of the public they serve. Although individual decisions provide direction to your destiny, how much is determined by the powers that be? Historical events are said to shape the future but the impact they have on individual lives might be greater than anyone suspects. Many of the defining factors of this and other professions are linked by legislation in one form or another.

Let's take a step back in time and consider the 1950's. It was the dawn of the Jet Age; the world was becoming a smaller place with the ability to span the globe in less than a day's time. If Hollywood's assumptions of the future rang true, we would all be driving flying cars and eating protein pills for sustenance by the new millennium. Some folks even thought that Rock & Roll to be just a passing trend. Obviously not all things come to pass; but in reality American industry was ramping up and the Baby-Boom was in full effect. Business practices over the course of the next two decades took place with a very different perspective than that of modern day. Land uses and businesses practices of the past didn't consider the repercussions on the land and water supply.

Environmental issues were gaining momentum rapidly at the end of the 1960's. An example of a major incident was the Cuyahoga River Fire. Located in Ohio, the Cuyahoga River was set ablaze in 1969 due to high levels of waste being dumped into the river by waterfront industries. The incident

made national headlines and how it initially combusted is still scrutinized, but the extensive pollution content was considered the big story. Events such as these, the lack of sound environmental practices, and surely political pressure brought forth the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Initially the EPA addressed air quality issues along with banning pesticides such as DDT, but one of the biggest acts of legislation was the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) of 1974.

The Safe Drinking Water Act has in a sense been ever-changing; since its inception the Act has had built in benchmark dates. Over the past 33 years the SDWA, through several amendments and all of the associated regulations, have prompted numerous changes to the water system operations. Stand alone regulations followed suit and continue to alter the shape of water system operations. How the world has changed is open to personal interpretation; the future does not always hold the promises of the past, but one thing it does hold is the promise of change. An entire book could be written on the process of change, but what brought forth the change I am referring to is directly related to the perception of public health.

The SDWA was a reflection of concerns linked to public health. How do you define public health? When 1,234 registered voters were asked what the term "public health" made them think of, during a survey conducted for the Pew Charitable Trusts in 1999, about half the respondents opted for "Government provided healthcare system for all" or "Healthcare for the poor" (*Public Health Forum, A. Holtz, 2002*). The term public health seems to be a conundrum for the very people it's deemed to protect. This reinforces the fact that the public is not aware of what is involved in providing clean water. Many times the public perception is that water falls from the sky and is therefore a low cost resource. Is it possible that the resource itself is not what is reflected in their usually meager monthly water bill? The majority of the cost is associated with public health standards, testing and system maintenance. The definition of "health" is a personal attribute; when the phrase includes the word "public" a whole new dimension is added.

One of my co-workers has made the statement. "How different would land use practices have been if water quality was initially considered?" Considering this scenario many parts of the country could look quite different. We have all been to places where crossing city boundaries are only notable due a sign announcing the change. Many places are stripped of any individual identity due to an inundation of strip malls with a gas station on every corner. The land is covered by so much concrete that recharge to groundwater is mostly theory. It is hard to say what substantial changes would exist to highly populated areas if water supply protection and availability was a factor from the start. Land use decisions are strongly motivated by the collective mentality of the population. In other words if the values of that society are primarily commercial the area will probably reflect those values. Other factors come into play such as: population, amount of space, profits and commerce. There are many towns in Oregon that do not want large commercial growth and look to avoid becoming a concrete jungle. Of course there are two sides to every story and some communities look to expand at any cost. Usually the water supply is not considered, when a development can bring in large sums of money to a community. Land uses were a topic that needed to be considered when addressing water quality and the SDWA addressed this with its first amendment. The 1986 amendments brought this into the picture with the start of the Wellhead Protection Program. By using a grass roots approach the community could be made aware of the risks involved with certain land uses and activities.

The basis of this commentary was neither for nor against the EPA, regulations, or land use decisions in any one particular place. The rules that are generated dictate many specific needs for water systems in terms of compliance. This business like any other has been constantly evolving; looking back 30 years OAWU has strived to change with it to serve its members and water utilities throughout the state.

Taking a step back how does this legislation link us together? A piece of legislation cannot define a person; but it does dictate several facets of this profession. Regardless if it is providing training, meeting CEU requirements, or just meeting

monitoring standards our job descriptions have these requirements deeply engrained within them. Change to operations via regulations is sure to continue. How it affects operations and daily duties is yet to be seen. One thing is for sure, more changes are coming down the pipe, viable solutions will need to be provided and OAWU will be there.