

Change: The Only Constant
By Bethany Wright

Everything changes. No matter what the item or environment or process is, at some point it is going to be different than it is right now.

Take the topic of solid waste. A hundred years ago, nearly everything people threw away was made of natural material, and would biodegrade. Now, more than 15% of what we throw away is synthetic so it degrades slowly if at all. Back then, most people buried or just dumped things they did not want. That is still the most common method of disposal today, but back then each family was responsible for their own waste. Now we have regional landfills and mega-landfills which receive waste from whole sections of the United States. Back then, people would dispose of their waste on their own property. Now, it is not uncommon for waste to be sent by truck, train, or ship hundreds of miles away.

But change is gradual. Particularly on rural ranches, people continued to dump their waste on their land long after cities got trash service, and some people still do this today. I remember an example of a family that only recently stopped putting their trash out back.

My friend Sara is 31 years old. She grew up in a very old house- it started as a stage coach stop in 1893. One day when we were hiking around her family's land, we stumbled onto a ravine full of old glass bottles and rusty tin cans. I looked at her in wonder, and asked her what it was. She told me that that is where her family had put the trash. She remembered her uncle coming for Thanksgiving one year, and he got all the cans and wrappers left over from the dinner, and took them out to the ravine to where he had dumped the trash as a little boy. So when Sara and I found it, at least some of that heap was less than twenty years old.

But not all people got trash service in the last twenty years. Last May, I was way out in Crook County near Crooked River. A teacher there told me that he was working on his dad's farm the previous weekend. He recalled how his dad wanted to bury some old barn roofing. He started to dig a hole in a remote corner, only to find there was no room. He had put the remains of a remodeling project there a few years back, and it was still there, so he had to find a different place to dump the roofing! The farm has been in the family since Taft was president, and they had been burying their waste in different places since they got there.

From time to time, this old junk would appear where least expected. After his dad was done with the tractor, the teacher was tilling a patch of land. But the tractor hit something and wouldn't go. He backed it up, figuring he had unearthed a big rock or old stump. He started shoveling around the object so he could remove it. He found a good hold and attached the tractor hook. When it finally came loose, it turned out to be an 8 foot ball of ancient barbed wire fencing.

As this ball of wire shows, there is no “away”. The farmer who buried it got it out of his way, but then decades later it was a problem for someone else. This experience, where disposal in one place causes difficulties someplace else, is becoming more and more common. Take pharmaceuticals as an example. The common advice is “Don’t throw them, flush them”. But now pharmaceuticals are turning up in lakes, rivers, and even drinking water supplies. There is rising concern over this, and there are movements toward starting drug take back programs to combat this worrisome effect.

The desire to create a safer “away” prompted changes in 1984 to the federal regulations for landfills. Most old landfills have been closed, and all new landfills must conform to the “Subtitle D” requirements. All new landfills cannot be built on faults or wetlands, they must be lined with a flexible plastic liner and at least two feet of compacted clay, and they must have a collection system inside to collect the liquid and treat it. In addition, the waste must be covered daily with soil, ground water monitoring must take place, and bonds must be posted to cover the cost of environmental cleanup, in case of contamination. And Subtitle D was not the last change. As new information is collected and new technology is developed, the rules continue to change.

These have been big changes for the people in the waste industry. Especially at first, not everyone supported the changes. They felt the new way was a lot of work, and saw that it cost a lot of money. They remembered how it used to be, how they used to do it, in the ‘good old days’. But over the past 22 years, people have seen benefits from those changes. Landfills are safer and contamination is down.

All of you who work in the drinking water or wastewater industry face change as well. It seems like every year the restrictions on what can be in the water or how you have to test get updated. You have to learn new methods, buy new equipment, and follow new requirements. You might feel like you are struggling to keep up. And then, just when you feel you are getting the hang of it, sometimes the changes are changed! “Put fluoride into the drinking water; take phosphate out of the wastewater. Prepare a new report, and don’t forget the new fee. Test for radioactivity, and use this new formula to calculate your TMDL’s.”

Yes, the only constant is change. And one of the things I appreciate about OAWU and National Rural Water is that they are there to help you navigate this change. National Rural Water has repeatedly contacted the EPA to ask that the rules be reasonable, effective, and affordable. OAWU has consistently worked at the state level to preserve local control of each system, and for regulations that are not overly burdensome. Also, the OAWU Circuit Riders are a great resource. They can answer a lot of your questions and help you with your process. OAWU classes can also prepare you for change. As a member of OAWU, you have access to a lot of resources, so use them to your best advantage.

As we look into the new year, there will undoubtedly be changes ahead. But no matter what the change, OAWU is here to help. Through the old and the new, best wishes for you and the work that you do.