

The Management Revolution – Boot Camps for Operator Advancement on the Rise

by Thomas W. Groves

Another revolution recently began in New England, a place well known for its storied history and revolutionary battles. This modern revolution is non-violent and uncontested. An entire professional sub-group – wastewater treatment facility managers – is vanishing and the resulting upheaval is driving the rapid transition of wastewater treatment operations specialists into management.

It has increasingly become apparent that management positions at many wastewater treatment facilities (WWTFs) are or will become vacant as many current managers have either reached, or soon will reach, retirement age. With the average age of those in the wastewater field steadily increasing, retirements are a fact of life. Unfortunately, many facilities did not foresee the impending need to replace its managers. Such facilities will not only lose their managers, they will also lose valuable institutional memory and historical knowledge that was never documented. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that there were no established programs in place to train the next generation of industry managers.

Operator Boot Camp Begins

Seeing a tremendous need and unique opportunity, a few motivated individuals and organizations – including the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), the Narragansett Water Pollution Control Association (NWPCA), and the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NEIWPCC) – began developing the first management training program for wastewater operators in the State of Rhode Island. The group envisioned an intense, multi-course, multi-day program to meet the training needs of the many qualified individuals in the wastewater field who could make good managers if provided the necessary skills and training. The program was appropriately named the Rhode Island Operator Boot Camp. Many of the program's students had never considered management as a career path. However, after investing long hours learning about the wastewater field through this program, many have found themselves aspiring to long-term management careers in the field.

The first Rhode Island Boot Camp began in Fall 2007 with 13 individuals. The goals of that first boot camp were to help build the knowledge base, confidence and contacts of potential future wastewater treatment facility managers. This was accomplished through a series of training sessions on a variety of topics pertinent to management, such as performance management, labor relations, budgeting and media relations.

Above, right: Management expertise is shared with participants in Rhode Island's First Year Operator Boot Camp classroom, an effort that spearheaded the management training revolution in New England. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Narragansett Water Pollution Control Association (NWPCA), and New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission developed the program.

Right: Rhode Island's first class celebrates graduation.

To keep program costs as low as possible, the RI organizers took advantage of homegrown talent by asking existing WWTF managers, local and regional associations, and local and regional training organizations to deliver the training, which was provided in the form of one class per month over a 12-month period. Students were accepted based on self or peer nominations with a final review and acceptance of the applications by the state wastewater association (NWPCA). Applicants were not being charged anything for their acceptance to the program. Each accepted applicant was required to attend every session and their employers were asked to support this by not requiring them to take vacation or personal time to attend. Some of the costs of the programs were donated by individuals or organizations, and some costs were reimbursed from a small amount of training and technical assistance funds that were provided by the US Environmental Protection Agency under section 104(g) of the Clean Water Act to NEIWPCC for the State of Rhode Island. Unfortunately, 2007 was the last year of USEPA funding for this program.

Students who completed this program saw their professional pride soar as a result of participation. Employers noticed these

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individuals developed a new found appreciation for the issues that management wrestles with on a daily basis. Furthermore, each individual gained a close network of their peers which developed over the course of the year-long, collegial program.

The Rhode Island Boot Camp continued for two more years: with 2009/2010 having 11 participants. At the conclusion of the third year, the program was put on hold temporarily since the demand had been met for RI, and it had become extremely difficult and time-consuming to maintain a voluntary, no-cost program with state staffing and resources being reduced and refocused.

Boot Camp Moves to Maine

Based on the success of the RI Operator Boot Camp model and faced with the same need for qualified management personnel, the Maine Joint Environmental Training Coordinating Committee (JETCC) began exploring efforts to duplicate the Boot Camp program for Maine. With additional sponsors – Maine Department of Environmental Protection (MEDEP), Maine Waste Water Control Association (MWWCA) and NEIWPCC – the JETCC Board of Directors was prepared to kick off its own version of the program in Fall 2009. The Maine program had to be somewhat self-sustaining; therefore, unlike the Rhode Island program, applicants paid a program registration fee – \$500 per student the first year. In addition, due to Maine's large geographic size, the JETCC board realized it could not draw applicants from across the entire state as Rhode Island did. Therefore, it chose one location (Saco, Maine) with the hope of moving the program in subsequent years to other areas of the state. The JETCC board also decided that Operator Boot Camp should be renamed the Maine Management Candidate School (MCS) to better convey the management objective of the program.

The MCS program used a similar nomination and selection process as Rhode Island and had a successful first season, graduating 17 individuals in September 2010 at the annual MWWCA

convention. Unfortunately, the costs for the first year of the program were not fully self-sustaining. With financial commitments from MWWCA and the MEDEP, the JETCC board still needed to significantly subsidize the program. The board approved this in the first year, but subsequent years would require more cost efficiency. For its second year, the program was located in Bangor, Maine and open to candidates from drinking water system operations. This influx of new candidates to the pool necessitated a slight change to the curriculum, but not significantly so, since management is largely comparable, whether in a water or wastewater treatment facility. With the addition of drinking water professionals, the MCS was able to attract sponsorships from the water supply industry. Maine Water Utilities Association and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services contributed to the program, along with MWWCA, MEDEP, and the participants or their respective communities.

Year two of the program successfully graduated 22 individuals (five of whom were drinking water operations specialists) at the annual MWWCA convention in September 2011. This, the third year held in Portland, ME, has been similarly successful, graduating another 20 candidates, even though the registration fees were increased per applicant to \$750. Applicants were not deterred by the increased costs. The program's year four is currently in the nomina-

Right: A Maine Management Candidate School classroom addresses the demand for wastewater facility managers.

Below: Graduates of the 2011 Class held in Bangor, Maine



Photos provided courtesy of NEIWPCC



tion/application process with the kickoff expected October 2012 in Waterville, Maine.

Trend Spreads through New England

Continuing off the success of the Rhode Island and Maine programs, other New England states have begun or will soon begin their own versions of the RI Operator Boot Camp program. Massachusetts conducted their first successful program in Fall 2010, graduating 22 individuals from their Massachusetts Wastewater Management Training Program at the annual Massachusetts Water Pollution Control Association's (MWPCA) convention and trade show in September 2011. The Massachusetts program is sponsored by NEIWPC, the MWPCA and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection with a fee of \$500 per applicant. Unlike previous versions of boot camp, NEIWPC directly leads the majority of the Massachusetts program under a contract between the Commission and State of Massachusetts to coordinate the state's wastewater systems operations specialist training and certification programs. Year two of the Massachusetts program began in February 2012 and will conclude with a graduation at the annual New England Water Environment Association's (NEWEA) January 2013 conference in Boston. Year two of the Massachusetts management program included a new feature – it offered selected sessions

graduating. Year two has been postponed until early 2013.

October 2012 launches the first class of the Connecticut Leadership Training Program with 20 students. Co-sponsored by NEIWPC and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the program is being led by the Connecticut Water Pollution Abatement Association.

Lastly, Vermont has expressed an interest in following these models and developing a program in conjunction with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation and the Green Mountain Water Environment Association. Program planning is in the early stages, but NEIWPC has met with the groups involved to educate them on the different styles of boot camps available and to discuss how Vermont and NEIWPC can best deliver a program.

Lessons Learned

Although these state management training programs have different names, the goal remains the same – to train applicants and provide them with the knowledge base, confidence and contacts to become future wastewater treatment facility managers. With the amount of money invested into wastewater infrastructure, properly trained managers are essential. This is especially true as many facilities face budget constraints along with more stringent permits that require upgrades on aging, crumbling infrastructure. There

is no guarantee that any of these management program attendees will be successful managers, but each graduate has shown the initiative needed and been provided with the tools and the contacts to succeed. Management personnel shortages and the potential loss of historical knowledge is a serious concern, and these state programs proactively attempt to resolve these issues.

The revolution is not quite complete. It's time now for New York State to take the plunge. It will be a challenge, but other states have paved the way for this worthwhile cause. All that's required is a *need* (which is seen across the state); a *champion* (someone to step forward and lead the charge); *groups* willing

to help (I'm sure there are many); and the *applicants* (build it and they will come!).

For information on any of these programs, please contact the following:

- RI Operator Boot Camp, Bill Patenaude, RI DEM, 401-222-4700 (ext.7264)
- Maine Management Candidate School, Leeann Hanson, JETCC, 207-253-8020
- Massachusetts Management Program, Jim Laliberte, NEIWPC, 978-323-7929



Photo provided courtesy of NEIWPC

At the Massachusetts Water Pollution Control Association's annual convention in September 2011, graduates of the state's first Wastewater Management Training Program were recognized. The training program is sponsored by MWPCA, NEIWPC and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

opened to other operations specialists not enrolled in the year-long program. This was done primarily for financial reasons to help defray the costs of the year-long program for topics of interest to many. It also provides potential future management students with an alternative self-paced version of the training. However, because team and relationship building is an important part of the boot camp model, some sessions in the Massachusetts program are kept open only to year-long program enrollees. Unlike the Maine MCS, the Massachusetts program is limited to only wastewater treatment system operations specialists for the time being.

In addition to Massachusetts, the remaining New England states are moving forward with similar programs. New Hampshire conducted a successful one-year management training program through the New Hampshire Wastewater Pollution Control Association (NHWP). The NH program began in 2010 with 16 students

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