



RURAL matters

The magazine of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership

2016
Issue 1

In this issue:

Small loans for
small systems

Clerk resources and
trainings

Water and
wastewater on the
US-Mexico border

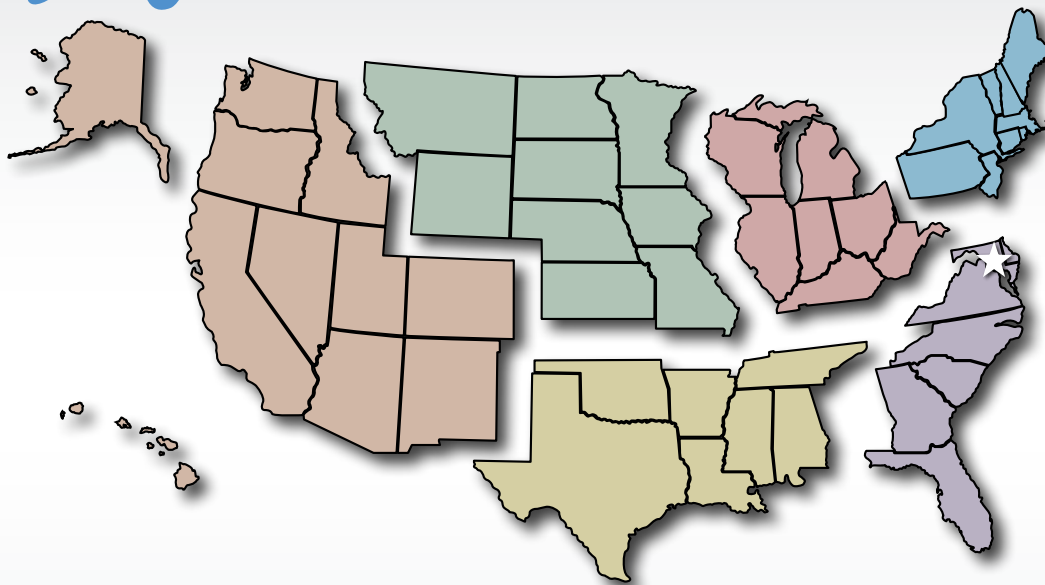
Need help with your community's water or wastewater system?

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is a national network of nonprofit organizations working to ensure that rural and small communities throughout the United States have access to safe drinking water and sanitary wastewater disposal. The six regional RCAPs provide a variety of programs to accomplish this goal, such as direct training and technical assistance, leveraging millions of dollars to assist communities develop and improve their water and wastewater systems.

If you are seeking assistance in your community, contact the office for the RCAP region that your state is in, according to the map below. Work in individual communities is coordinated by these regional offices.



Rural Community Assistance Partnership



Western RCAP

Rural Community Assistance Corporation

3120 Freeboard Drive, Suite 201
West Sacramento, CA 95691
(916) 447-2854
www.rcac.org

Midwest RCAP

Midwest Assistance Program

303 N. Market St., Suite 2
Maryville, MO 64468
(660) 562-2575
www.map-inc.org

Southern RCAP

Communities Unlimited

3 East Colt Square Drive
Fayetteville, AR 72703
(479) 443-2700
www.communitiesu.org

Northeast RCAP

RCAP Solutions

205 School Street
Gardner, MA 01440
(800) 488-1969
www.rcapsolutions.org



Puerto Rico
(Northeast RCAP)

Great Lakes RCAP

WSOS Community Action Commission

P.O. Box 590
219 S. Front St., 2nd Floor
Fremont, OH 43420
(800) 775-9767
www.glracap.org

Southeast RCAP

Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project

347 Campbell Ave. SW
Roanoke, VA 24016
(866) 928-3731
www.sercap.org

★ RCAP National Office ★

1701 K Street NW, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20006
(202) 408-1273 • (800) 321-7227
www.rcap.org

RURAL matters

The magazine of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership

2016
Issue 1

Follow us on:



/RCAPInc

features



Photo courtesy of Sherry Loos

departments

Director's Letter 5

Rural Developments 7

Small Loans for Small Systems 10

Clerk Proficiency 13

Water and Wastewater on the US-Mexico Border 16

Letter from the Field 22

National Conference Recap 23

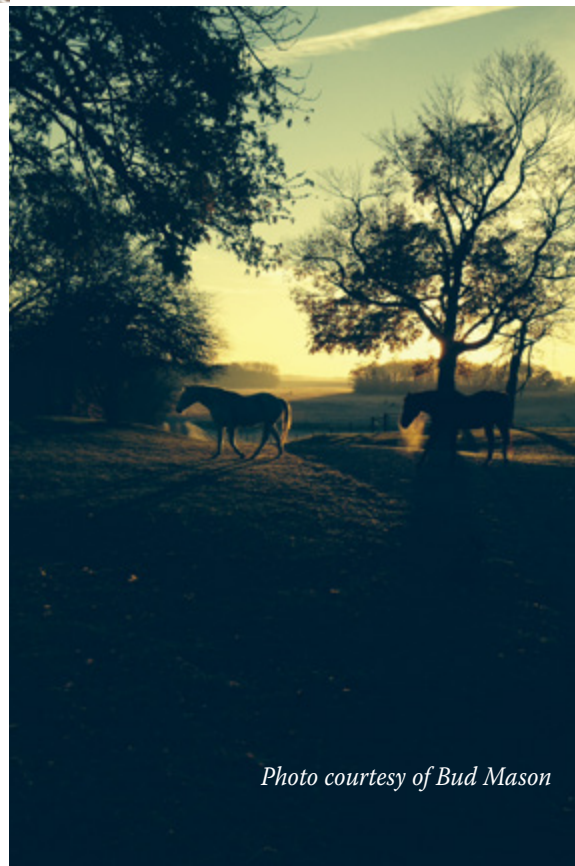


Photo courtesy of Bud Mason



Practical solutions for improving rural communities

RURAL matters

The magazine of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership

Rural Matters® (ISSN 1097-7619) is a publication of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.

1701 K Street NW, Suite 700; Washington, DC 20006

Tel: (202) 408-1273 Fax: (202) 408-8165

www.rcap.org

Subscription/editorial/advertising inquiries: ruralmatters@rcap.org

PUBLISHER

Robert Stewart, RCAP Executive Director

MANAGING EDITOR

Breanna Detwiler, Director of Communications

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Mark Rounsavall

Christia Wienecke

Elaine Crutchfield

Ari Neumann

Robert Stewart

Veronica Bitting

Cover photo by Scott Strahley, RCAP Technical Assistance Provider

Publication of *Rural Matters*® is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Opinions and ideas expressed in *Rural Matters*® are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc., its affiliates, officers, or directors.

© 2016 Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc. All rights reserved. *Rural Matters*® and the Rural Matters logo are trademarks of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.



RCAP BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Hope Cupit, President

Southeast Rural Community Assistance
Project

Zack Space, Vice President

Vorys Advisors LLC

Niel Ritchie, Secretary/Treasurer

League of Rural Voters

Karen Koller

RCAP Solutions

Stan Keasling

Rural Community Assistance Corporation

Michael Brownfield

Midwest Assistance Program

Ruthann House

Great Lakes RCAP

Ines Polonius

Communities Unlimited

Suzanne Crawford

Maine Fulbright Association

Francisco Castellanos

Cast Consulting

Michael Taylor

Louisiana Land Trust

Anish Jantrania

Texas A&M University

RCAP NATIONAL STAFF

Robert Stewart

Executive Director

Joy Barrett

Director of Training and Technical Services

David Clark

Director of Environmental Programs

Breanna Detwiler

Director of Communications

Bill Hogrewe

Director of Engineering Services

Eleanor Lloyd

Director of Finance

Ari Neumann

Director of Policy

Jeff Oxenford

Training and Technical Services Specialist

Director's letter



Robert Stewart
RCAP Executive Director

Why is it that it takes a major failure by a utility in supplying safe drinking water before the public pays any attention to the potential crisis regarding our ability to provide this basic human need for all Americans? The situation in Flint, Michigan has dominated the headlines, the media, and the internet in the last several weeks, but my intention is not to recount the specifics of that story. Rather, I want to consider a few lessons learned from this episode.

First, all of us in the water industry need to conduct ongoing public education programs. An informed public will not only be more cognizant of what it takes to provide safe drinking water at the tap, they will also be more aware of the need to invest in infrastructure, to provide training for operators, and to protect drinking water sources. Local, state, and federal officials and elected representatives must understand that underinvestment in public utilities (as well as lax oversight) may lead to an ever-increasing failure rate by utilities struggling to deliver water in the quantity and quality demanded by their customers. In addition, attempts to “save money” on producing and delivering safe drinking water can prove costly in regards to public health; providing drinking water services is a complex and expensive undertaking by local providers.

Uninformed “emergency managers,” as in the case of Flint, should not be making decisions that are contrary to the wishes of locally elected representatives and professional utility operators and managers. I would argue that appointing such managers who usurp the authority of locally elected officials is contrary to our form of representative democracy, but that discussion will be left to another day. State and federal regulatory agencies must continue to exercise appropriate and authorized oversight activities regarding drinking water standards and must be funded at a sufficient level to adequately discharge these responsibilities.

In the case of Flint, there was a failure at every level, local, state, and federal, to exercise proper oversight over local utility operations. Changing the source and quality of water entering into any distribution system can have major impacts that should be considered along with appropriate mitigation actions taken if needed. The failure to conduct and oversee proper lead sampling is inexcusable given that standard procedures for these tests were adopted decades ago. Processes for corrosion control, including the use of phosphates to coat pipe interiors and thereby reduce the potential for corrosion and possible leaching of lead into the drinking water, are long-standing and proven procedures used by a large number of utilities (including Detroit that provided safe water to Flint for many years).

More emphasis must be placed on thorough training of operators and managers on water quality issues within distribution systems. The costs for adequate training, basic preventative maintenance and routine monitoring are much less than the costs for remediation and equipment failure. The costs for corrosion control are miniscule, for example, in comparison to the costs in Flint to replace distribution pipes and service lines and to possibly remediate the adverse health impacts of consuming water with high levels of lead. Unfortunately, studies have shown that in many cases learning disabilities in children resulting from high lead exposure can be permanent.

[continued on next page](#)

continued from previous page

In addition, this situation provides further support for a nationwide re-examination of the advantages of consolidating the provision of drinking water services, especially regarding production and treatment. In the present case, the City of Detroit had been providing treated water services to its metropolitan area including several outlying counties and other local jurisdictions, including Flint for 30 or more years. This metropolitan approach has worked well in many other areas, Nashville, Cincinnati, and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California are a few of the many notable examples. These large utilities can cost-effectively provide treated water to local jurisdictions while still allowing the smaller utilities to provide distribution to the final customers. For the small and rural systems that RCAP assists, this approach can at times eliminate the need for separate, small treatment plants and potentially reduce costs to customers.

Too often RCAP sees that small, low-income, and/or minority communities are the ones that suffer from a lack of adequate and safe drinking water. There also has been considerable discussion over the issue of regulating water sales to customers (or utilities) outside of the corporate boundaries of the supplier. Costs for supplying treated water to other “out of area” customers must be based on verifiable costs of production, treatment, and delivery, and, if necessary, states should grant their public utility commissions the authority to oversee these wholesale charges.

Although the case in Flint must remind us all that considerable work remains in ensuring all Americans receive safe drinking water, it is important to point out that virtually all of the over 50,000 community water systems in the United States supply safe drinking water to their customers, day in and day out. Situations such as Flint must prompt everyone in the water industry to be ever vigilant in carrying out their responsibilities to ensure that safe drinking water is available for all Americans, regardless of their location or income level. ■

Photo courtesy of Wesley Hoem



rural developments



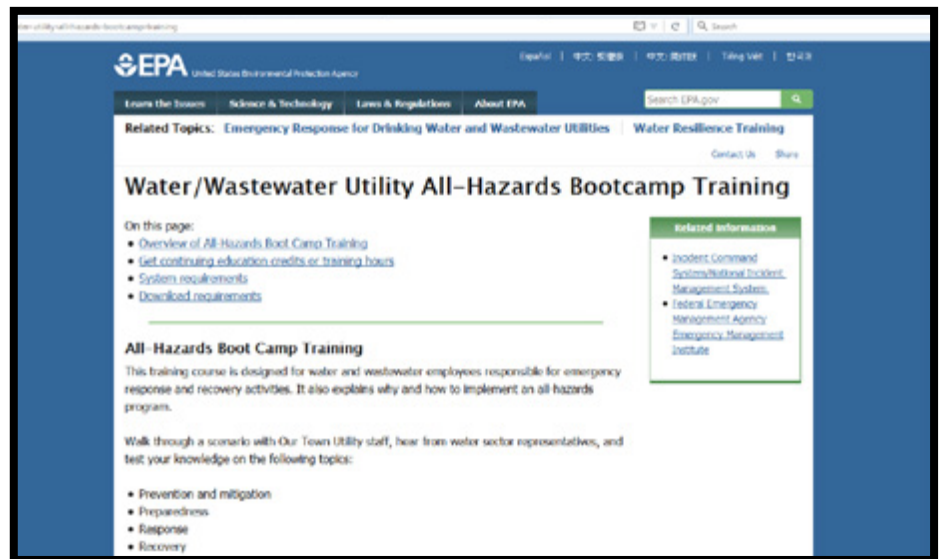
News and resources from the US Environmental Protection Agency

White House Announces Public-Private Innovation Strategy to Build a Sustainable Water Future

On December 15, 2015, the White House announced a new public-private water innovation strategy. This strategy includes an aggressive two-part approach by EPA and other federal agencies to address the impacts of climate change on the use and supply of the nation's water resources and calls on private sector and other stakeholder groups to help significantly scale up research and investment in water efficiency solutions. The Administration's new water innovation strategy calls for:

- Boosting water sustainability and long-term water security by increasing use of water-efficient and -reuse technologies.
- Promoting and investing in breakthrough research and development that will reduce the price, energy costs, and emissions requirements of new water supply technology to achieve "pipe parity" in the next decade.

The strategy was announced at a Roundtable on Water Innovation held to engage with industry and public leaders to start building broader consensus on a path forward. The roundtable provided an opportunity for leaders from industry, academia, and federal, state, and local governments to discuss how an aggressive innovation agenda can help America



meet the challenge of a constrained water supply and increase the resilience of businesses and communities in regions that will be affected by increasingly severe and lengthy droughts.

To learn more, visit <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/15/fact-sheet-administration-announces-public-private-innovation-strategy>

New EPA Computer Training Helps Water and Wastewater Utilities Build Resilience

EPA's new Water/Wastewater All-Hazard Boot Camp Training is a comprehensive computer-based course that incorporates emergency planning, response, and recovery activities into an all-hazard management program for water utilities.

The training covers several topics including: identifying and funding potential hazard mitigation projects, developing and updating an Emergency Response Plan (ERP), coordinating mutual aid and assistance during emergencies, conducting damage assessments, and many more. The training features clickable displays, testimonials from water utility professionals, knowledge checks, and recommendations for additional tools and resources to build all-hazards resilience. Many states have already pre-approved the course for continuing education hours for both water and wastewater personnel.

To learn more visit, <http://www.epa.gov/waterresiliencetraining/waterwastewater-utility-all-hazards-bootcamp-training>

continued on next page

EPA Releases Strategic Plan for Protecting Drinking Water from Harmful Algal Blooms

Harmful algal blooms and their associated toxins pose a risk to drinking water quality. EPA has released a comprehensive strategic plan outlining actions to address algal toxins in drinking water. Solving the challenge of algal toxins in drinking water will require action at all levels of government and approaches that are collaborative, innovative, and persistent. EPA will work closely with other federal agencies, state and local governments, and the public to provide scientific and technical leadership on a number of fronts, including health effects studies. The agency will work on treatment techniques and monitoring technologies, develop innovative mapping tools to help protect drinking water sources, provide technical support to states and public water systems, issue health advisories, and support activities to protect drinking water sources.

To learn more, visit <http://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-11/documents/algal-risk-assessment-strategic-plan-2015.pdf>

Other news and resources

USDA Provides \$314 Million in Water and Waste Infrastructure Improvements in Rural Communities Nationwide

WASHINGTON— On Nov. 2, 2015 USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced loans and grants for 141 projects to build and improve water and wastewater infrastructure in rural communities across the nation.

"Many rural communities need to upgrade and repair their water and wastewater systems, but often lack the resources to do so," Vilsack said. "These loans and grants will help accomplish this goal. USDA's support for infrastructure improvements is an essential part of building strong rural economies."

USDA is awarding \$299 million for 88 projects in the Water and Waste Disposal

Loan and Grant Program and \$15 million for 53 grants in the Emergency Community Water Assistance Grant (ECWAG) program.

ECWAG grants enable water systems that serve eligible rural communities to prepare for, or recover from, imminent or actual emergencies that threaten the availability of safe drinking water. Water and Waste program recipients can use funds to construct water and waste facilities in rural communities.

The Big Sandy Rancheria Band of Western Mono Indians in Fresno, California, a community RCAP has worked with, has been selected to receive a \$494,300 ECWAG grant to drill a well and connect it and another well to the water system.

Three recipients who received funding were given priority points through a provision in the 2014 Farm Bill that encourages communities to adopt regional economic development plans. These projects are centered on regional collaboration and long-term growth strategies. They leverage outside resources and capitalize on a region's unique strengths.

The recipients are the West Stewartstown (New Hampshire) Water Precinct, the Lowcountry Regional Water System in Hampton, South Carolina, and the city of Waubun, Minnesota. All three projects involve upgrades to water and wastewater systems. The Hampton, South Carolina, project is in a high-poverty area designated as a Promise Zone. In areas designated as Promise Zones, federal, state and private-sector partners work with local communities and businesses to create jobs, increase economic security, expand educational opportunities, and increase access to quality, affordable housing.

Six of the projects announced today will provide \$3.9 million to benefit Native American areas. These water and waste awards include the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians in Minnesota and five



Photo courtesy of CSIRO

projects in California, including Big Sandy Rancheria, two awards to the Cortina Band of Wintun Indians, the Grindstone Indian Rancheria, and the Yurok Tribe.

Two projects will provide \$9.1 million for colonias in New Mexico. The recipients are the Garfield Mutual Domestic Water Consumers and Mutual Sewer Works Association and the La Luz Mutual Domestic Water Association. Colonias are unincorporated, low-income, mostly Hispanic U.S. communities along the Mexico border that lack adequate housing, drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. (See more on water issues in Colonias on pg 16.)

Since 2009, USDA has helped provide improved water and wastewater services to nearly 18 million rural residents by investing \$12.3 billion in 5,174 projects.

Funding of each award is contingent upon the recipient meeting the terms of the grant and loan agreement.

USDA Rural Development is accepting applications for loans and grants to build rural water infrastructure. Applications may be completed online through RDAPPLY, a new electronic filing system, and at state and local Rural Development offices. Public entities (counties, townships, and communities), non-profit organizations, and tribal communities with a population of 10,000 or less are eligible to apply. Interest rates for this program are at historically low levels, ranging from 2 percent to 3.25 percent. Loan terms can be up to 40 years. For more information, visit <http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rd-apply>.

President Obama signs the Grassroots Rural and Small Community Water System Assistance Act

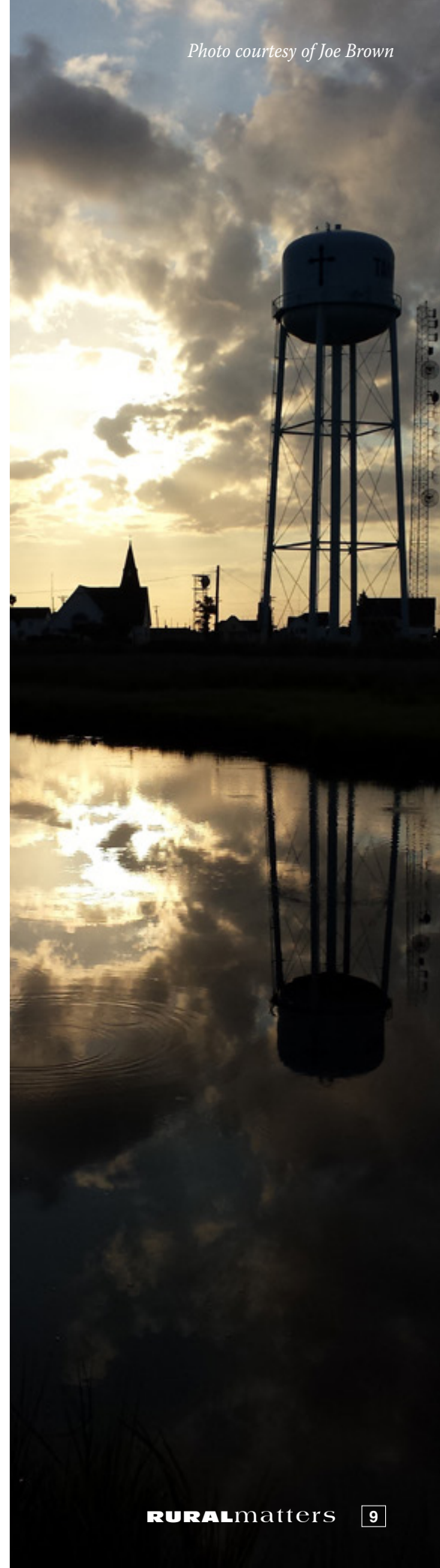
WASHINGTON, DC- On December 11, 2015, President Obama signed into law S. 611, the Grassroots Rural and Small

Community Water Systems Assistance Act. The bill, sponsored by Senators Roger Wicker (R – Mississippi) and Heidi Heitkamp (D – N. Dakota) amends the Safe Drinking Water Act to reauthorize technical assistance to small public water systems. With these funds, EPA partners with non-profit organizations, including the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP), that provide onsite technical assistance and training to small communities and to private well owners to help them comply with federal drinking water regulations. The legislation enjoyed strong bipartisan support and passed in the Senate and the House by voice vote.

RCAP's Executive Director, Robert Stewart, testified in support of the bill on October 22, 2015. "RCAP supports this bipartisan effort to reauthorize technical assistance for small community water systems," Stewart said of the bill's passage. "We thank Senators Wicker and Heitkamp and Representatives Harper and Tonko for their leadership on this issue, and hope that this legislation will serve as a model for Congress to work on a bipartisan basis to address rural America's substantial water infrastructure needs."

In the past year, funds provided by EPA's technical assistance program have enabled RCAP to provide direct assistance to over 266 communities and hold over 184 trainings across the county, ensuring that rural communities have access to clean and safe drinking water. Examples of assistance include the Union Church Waterworks Association in Mississippi where RCAP staff worked on increasing capacity to ensure sustainability and minimize Safe Drinking Water Act compliance issues.

"This program is integral to achieving EPA's goals for the long-term sustainability of rural water systems and the agency's efforts to ensure that all Americans have access to clean, safe drinking water at an affordable rate," added Stewart. ■



Small Dollars for Small Community Needs

The Water and Waste Loan Fund at Communities Unlimited

by Mark Rounsavall

In May of 1992, Community Resource Group Inc., now Communities Unlimited Inc. (CU), the southern regional RCAP partner, made a loan of \$18,000 to the 300 residents of Bruni, Texas (southeast of Laredo, Texas) to purchase a privately owned water system in order to upgrade and improve public water service in the small community. The small loan to Bruni in 1992 was the first water and wastewater improvement loan made by Communities Unlimited. In the 23 years since 1992, Communities Unlimited has made another 415 water and wastewater improvement loans totaling almost \$33 million dollars. CU water and wastewater loans have gone to small utilities in 21 different states, with loan amounts ranging from as little as \$3,000 to more than \$500,000. Loan purposes have ranged from purchasing computer equipment and utility service trucks, to completing engineering studies and small capital improvement projects like line extensions, drilling new wells, and replacing pumps and lift stations.

Why a Small Loan Fund?

The staff at Communities Unlimited believed there was a need for a source of small loans for small communities. In short, CU saw the need to fill the demand for loans that were generally deemed too small for state and/or federal loan programs due to their high transaction costs, and yet were also seen as too risky for banks and commercial lenders. After many years of working closely with small water and wastewater utilities, the CU-RCAP staff had witnessed many small dollar needs that simply could not be met by large dollar lenders. In many instances, a small water or wastewater system needed quick access to \$50,000 or \$100,000, not \$1 million; so small water and wastewater utilities were left with very limited financing options.

To start the CU Loan Fund, Communities Unlimited secured a \$2 million Program Related Investment (PRI) from the Ford Foundation, and a \$1 million long-term loan from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Intermediary Relending Program (IRP). The Ford PRI was a short-term, ten year loan to CU with an annual interest rate of 1%. The USDA IRP loan is a thirty-year loan to CU also with an annual interest rate of 1%

that is repaid in annual installments over 28 years. So with an initial capitalization of \$3 million available to lend, the CU loan fund was born. Although lending activity was slow to start, by August 1994, the first \$1 million in loan capital was fully committed to borrowers and benefitting small utilities.

Design of the CU Loan Fund

The design of the CU Loan Fund program included a strong emphasis on flexibility, speed, and onsite technical assistance from the CU-RCAP staff in order to meet the needs of small communities and utilities.

Flexibility

CU loans have low interest rates, reasonable terms, flexible underwriting criteria, and repayment plans that are designed to support the special credit needs of rural and small communities

Photo courtesy of Bud Mason



and utilities. The CU loan application process includes a four page application and a request for financial statements and supporting documentation.

Speed

One of the most important characteristics of CU water and wastewater lending is the quick response to customers. The normal turn-around time from receipt of a completed application to approval, loan commitment, and/or closing is about two weeks. In emergency situations, Communities Unlimited has issued loan commitments in less than 24 hours.

Onsite Technical Assistance

Loans are combined with onsite technical assistance from RCAP technical assistance staff. These services are provided to prospective borrowers free of charge through federal or state contracts and can include financial reviews and/or utility rate studies as part of the loan application process.

Basic Types of Loans

Short-Term, Single Payment (Balloon) Loans

Most of these loans are designed to help small communities with predevelopment costs associated with the planning, design, and implementation of major capital improvement projects that typically receive permanent financing from government or bond programs. Consequently, CU's short-term loans (generally maturities of two years or less) are paid at maturity by take-out financing provided by other lenders such as USDA Rural Utilities Service, State Revolving Loan funds, or bond issue financing. Both principal and interest may be deferred. When CU provides financing for predevelopment expenses it is generally an essential first step for a community to secure permanent financing for major water/wastewater capital improvements. Examples of typical predevelopment projects include the following:

- Payment for the reasonable expenses of engineering, environmental studies, surveys and legal services.
- The cost of acquiring interest in land and property rights, including water rights, leases, rights of way, easements, and site acquisition that is necessary for the construction of a major water and wastewater capital improvement project.
- Test wells and soil borings.
- Smoke testing of existing wastewater collection lines.



Photo courtesy of Jan Kittay

Fully-Amortized Loans

These are loans that have equal monthly payments and are primarily used to finance small capital improvement project costs that are not part of a system's normal operations and maintenance. Often these loans relate to health, safety, and compliance issues that need to be dealt with promptly, or in some cases, as true emergency situations. Examples of small capital improvement projects include:

- Replacement costs of critical system components and equipment, which are no longer functional and are adversely affecting the quality of service provided.
- Installation of new equipment to provide for enhanced operations in terms of water quantity and quality and improved wastewater treatment and disposal (e.g. pumps, lift stations, aerators, chemical feed and disinfection systems, filter media, electrical control systems, flow meters, back-up generators).
- Drilling new well(s) or construction costs associated with connecting with another water supplier or system.
- Rehabilitation costs of water storage, treatment, and/or disposal facilities.

continued on next page

- Small-scale line extension projects to serve additional customers in rural areas.
- Water or sewer line relocation projects.
- Payment of reasonable costs of engineering and legal services necessary to complete small-scale improvement projects such as those mentioned above.

The maximum loan amount for a CU water/waste loan was raised from \$250,000 to \$500,000 in December 2013. The maximum loan term was also raised from ten years to fifteen years at that time. CU loans must be secured typically in the form of a Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) and security agreement filed against the applicant's assets including a pledge of revenues (promissory note) from the system and/or a lien on specific equipment if purchased with loan proceeds. CU interest rates vary from time to time, but generally range from 3% to 6% depending upon the term of the loan, the shorter the term the lower the interest rate.

CU Lending Priorities

Loan priorities generally target communities with the greatest need. The following priorities generally guide the CU water and wastewater loan program consistent with CU's non-profit mission:

Emergency/urgent problems that require loan funds to rehabilitate or replace critical components related to the disruption of water supply or wastewater disposal services creating a danger to public health and sanitation.

Utilities in non-compliance with state/federal health standards including those under Consent Order or Administration Order and those with violations of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, and Clean Water Act, resulting in a risk to community and environmental health.

Service to persistent poverty communities— priority is given to systems identified as needing special assistance by Rural Development/Rural Utility Service and Health and Human Services (HHS) in order to preserve existing water and wastewater services for customers at an affordable and reasonable cost. In these communities, preserving affordable services is often a critical component of economic development strategies.

Expanding service to additional rural areas through loans that help unserved families and businesses obtain first time public water and wastewater service.

Encourage increased operational efficiencies through consolidations of ownership, management, and operation of smaller facilities to maximize their return on investment.

Growth of the CU Loan Fund

Over the past 23 years, the CU Loan Fund has continued to grow to meet additional infrastructure needs in small communities. In 2001, Communities Unlimited was recognized by the U.S. Treasury Department as a Certified Development Financial Institution (CDFI), and secured a \$1.2 million CDFI equity grant. In 2006, CU secured additional loan capital in the form of a Bank of America \$2 million Program Related Investment. Over the past ten years, the CU Loan fund has also attracted loan fund capital from Wells Fargo Bank, new USDA IRP loans, and USDA/Rural Utilities Service Revolving Loan grant fund capital.

The original Ford Foundation Program Related Investment of \$2 million was repaid in full in 2005, and the current capitalization of the CU Loan Fund is over \$17 million. Yet, even in 2015, after 23 years in business, the average CU water and wastewater loan is just under \$80,000.

CU Infrastructure Loans at Work

Falcon Heights, Texas (2007)

On a Friday evening in October of 2007, the Falcon Rural Water Supply Corporation in Starr County, Texas had a water supply crisis after a 60,000 gallon water storage tank collapsed. The collapse left 1,000 families completely without water and water system staff and engineers scrambling to resolve the problem. After contacting CU RCAP staff for assistance, Communities Unlimited was able to commit an emergency loan of \$144,500 to the Falcon Water Supply Corporation for the temporary replacement of the storage tank and other emergency repairs to restore water service.



Photo courtesy of Raul Gonzalez

Collapsed Water Storage Tank of the Falcon Rural Water Supply Corporation in Falcon Heights, Texas

Holmesville Water System Inc., Downsville, Louisiana (2008)

The Holmesville Water System in Union Parish, Louisiana was experiencing increased customer demand due to population growth needed to develop an additional source of water to meet local needs. Holmesville developed a project consisting of drilling a new 300 gallon per minute well and the rehabilitation of an existing water storage standpipe facility. Holmesville secured \$250,000 in November of 2008 from Communities Unlimited and completed their water supply project.



Photo courtesy of Chris Brunson

New Holmesville Water Supply Well

Cherokee Rural Water District #7, Oklahoma (2013)

In 2013, the Tenkiller School in Welling, Oklahoma in Cherokee County had a serious water supply problem. The school did not have sufficient water pressure and volume to meet the demand, and school officials were hauling in water in order to keep the school open. CU's Oklahoma staff worked with officials from the Cherokee Rural Water District (RWD) #7, their consulting engineer, and representatives of the Cherokee Nation to resolve the problem. The district needed to construct a new water distribution line to the school, and install two new pump stations to adequately serve the Tenkiller School. Communities Unlimited made a loan of \$169,000 to the Cherokee RWD #7 water utility to complete this project and consolidate an existing loan for a line extension from 2012. The CU loan was combined with a \$144,000 grant from the Cherokee Nation to finance the water project upgrade. ■

Rounsavall is the RCAP Program Director of the Southern RCAP, Communities Unlimited.



Proficient Clerks Promote Proficient Systems

by Christia Wienecke

Small rural communities with water and wastewater utilities, including districts, villages, and municipalities, require a clerk that is proficient in a variety of specific skills to operate their utility efficiently. Unfortunately, a common misconception is that the position requires little or no experience or training. Relying on this belief frequently leads to failure to achieve and maintain system sustainability, an angry and uncooperative public, severe consequences from state agencies, a detrimental effect on community fire suppression ratings, inability to qualify for financial assistance to replace failing infrastructure, and even a negative economic impact. The good news is that there are individual and group clerk trainings and a wide variety of informational resources available to overcome this challenge.

The best way to evaluate a small rural utility's efficiency and sustainability is through an assessment of technical, managerial, and financial capacity. Some examples of the clerk's key roles in each of these elements are presented here. The expectations relating to the clerk's performance should be clearly defined in a detailed job description as guidance for the clerk, the employer, and as an aid in determining areas of weaknesses and strengths for training and educational planning.

Technical Capacity

Water loss impacts expenses, sometimes significantly enough that expenses exceed revenues. The clerk can determine the percentage of water loss by comparing the data collected monthly by the operator of the treated water that has been sent into distribution to the total gallons of metered water sold and gallons used for flushing. If the difference between the two

continued on next page

is large or increases suddenly, this may be an indication of a water leak, faulty readings, or deteriorating infrastructure. The administration can make an educated decision for steps toward an expeditious solution. Quickly solving a water loss issue can result in a reduction in repair expenses as well as a reduction in time the operator must spend in the repair process, which allows adequate time for proper preventative maintenance. In addition, the entire staff and administration demonstrate teamwork. All of these prove favorable to the financial bottom line and public trust and relations. *Note: To achieve the most accurate comparison for determining water loss percentages using this method, the clerk should obtain the reading from the operator as close as possible to the date the customer meters are read.*

Managerial Capacity

The clerk is almost always designated to be the Custodian of Records and, through provision of information from multiple sources, is crucial to the process of creation and implementation of policies and procedures. Policies and procedures include topics such as consistency and guidelines for proper operations, fair treatment of customers, regulatory compliance, risk management, and employee protocol. The clerk needs to be knowledgeable in local, state, and federal regulations and statutes; key people and entities that can offer professional advice and assistance; and will need to draw on accurate information compiled on a regularly scheduled basis from internal sources.

Financial Capacity

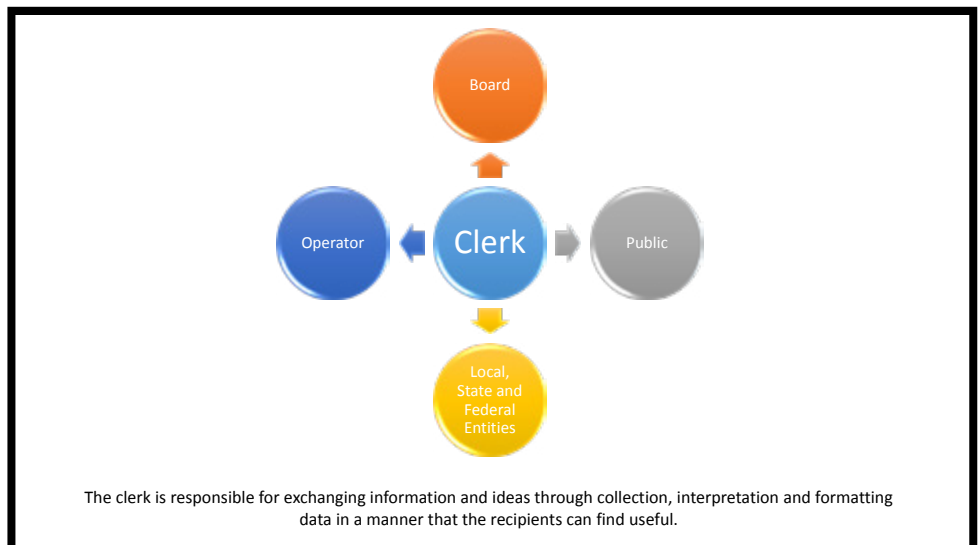
The clerk should be balancing the bank accounts and documenting each reconciliation. They must have, at the very least, a basic knowledge of accounting definitions and procedures.

A board cannot make educated and informed decisions without regular financial status reports from the clerk. For example, using the water loss scenario, an asset management plan or a capital improvement budget cannot be created for the improvement and replacement of failing infrastructure without proper financial reports. Assistance with funding capital improvements requires current, accurate records and analysis of revenues, expenditures, and debt load (liabilities) versus assets (infrastructure, accounts receivable, equipment, etc.). Rates should be set responsibly so increases can be logically justified. System per-

formance and operation can be measured by the financial stability of the utility. For example, if the electric bill has increased when electric rates themselves have not increased, it might indicate faulty or failing infrastructure. Analyzing accurate historical financial information, the board, clerk and operator can collaborate and determine a plan of action to progress toward a solution.

These are just a few examples of the importance of providing training, education, and resources for the clerk. The clerk's position is quite complex, and many individuals and entities rely on their collective information, accurate accounting, and ability to answer questions and comments relating to the operations of the utility. RCAP offers group and individual training specific to the position of the clerk, which has proven to be very successful. The training materials are reviewed and updated on a regular basis to educate clerks using the most current information on pertinent topics. Trainings vary from state to state to accommodate differences in professional entities, laws, and regulations. Board members and operators are encouraged to attend the trainings, too, whenever possible; teamwork is essential and well-rounded knowledge increases efficiency. Clerks are encouraged to get to know their local municipal league/organization, the regional planning commission that serves their county, the points of contact at their primacy agency, and a point of contact at their USDA Rural Development office to name a few. If there are doubts regarding who to contact, reach out to your regional RCAP for guidance and assistance.

RCAP seeks to provide the education, tools, and resources to promote regulatory compliance; maintain technical, managerial, and financial capacity for sustainability and public health; and ultimately instill the confidence that clerks need for independence and proficiency.



The following resources can serve as excellent reference materials for clerks and are free to download from the RCAP (www.rcap.org) website.

The Big Guide for Small Systems: A Resource for Board Members

This comprehensive desk reference is a wealth of information for all members of the utility. It has regulatory information, technical, managerial and financial information, a glossary, examples of recommended policies and procedures, job descriptions, and numerous resources to utilize throughout.

The Basics of Financial Management for Small Community Utilities

This how-to guide provides an overview of financial management for small-community water utilities, from developing and balancing an expense budget to estimating and collecting revenue. This primer is ideal for a board member of a drinking water or wastewater utility who needs to understand the financial aspects of a utility's operations. The guide explains in very simple, easy-to-understand terms how to read and interpret the common financial statements so more informed decisions can be made with the information that can be gained from them.

Formulate Great Rates: How to conduct a Rate Study for a Water System

A guide to developing a fair and equitable rate structure in a small drinking water or wastewater system. Walks users step-by-step through various worksheets in a process to calculate rates. Detailed instructions (including calculations) are provided for each worksheet, which can be completed by hand with worksheets provided in the guide or on electronic versions (Excel spreadsheets) of the worksheets. Also provides guidance on financial management of a system related to rates as a system's income stream.

A Drop of Knowledge: A Non-operator's Guide to Drinking Water Systems

This guide explains in simple, everyday language the technical aspects of drinking water utilities from source to tap. Describes the various components and operations involved in small drinking water systems, including source, treatment and system of distribution to the customer's home. This guide and its companion (below) are the perfect orientation and background guides for new small utility board members and small community decision makers.

A Drop of Knowledge: A Non-operator's Guide to Wastewater Systems

This guide explains in simple, everyday language the various components/operations of a small wastewater system from when the customer flushes his/her toilet through collection, treatment, and return to source. This guide and its companion (above) are the perfect orientation and background guides for new small utility board members and small community decision makers.

USDA Rural Utilities Service Borrower's Guide

This publication summarizes the managerial and financial requirements for communities that are receiving U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Services (RUS) loan funds for their water or wastewater utility. Focuses on the requirements for submitting management reports and financial statements and walks borrowers through the steps of completing the forms and submitting the reports and statements. Comes with a CD with blank forms that are easy to fill in. Also provides ways communities can monitor the financial health of their utilities.

Getting Your Project to Flow Smoothly: A Guide to Developing Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

A comprehensive guide on all the steps a project owner (governing body of a utility) should go through in planning, designing and constructing infrastructure. A very detailed how-to on all phases of the process. Includes many pitfalls to avoid. Discusses roles and responsibilities of the parties in a project – owner, engineer, inspector, contractor, etc. Discusses securing funding, how to stay organized, how to maintain control of a project. ■

Wienecke is a Technical Assistance Provider with the Midwest Assistance Program.



Assistance Needed for US Mexico Border Water Systems

by Ari Neumann and Robert Stewart

Over the past 25 years, significant progress has been made in addressing the water and wastewater needs in the colonias areas on the U.S. side of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, because of the varying definitions of “colonia” used by state and federal funding agencies, the multitude of jurisdictions in which colonias are located, and the ever-changing nature of the colonias themselves, few resources are available to measure the progress that has been made and determine the remaining needs in the colonias in all four border states. Last fall, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP), as part of a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), documented the state of water and wastewater availability in the colonias and made recommendations to address the remaining needs.

The RCAP team identified and compiled available existing information on the colonias into a geospatial database, then spoke with state and county officials, utilities serving colonias, engineers from the border region and colonia residents to fill in the information gaps and create as comprehensive of

a database of colonia attributes as was practicable. The final geospatial database contains attributes for 2,177 colonias in 35 border counties. Of those surveyed, 604 are high-needs colonias with a combined population of 134,419. High-needs colonias are typically unserved or underserved with respect to drinking water, wastewater, or both. In many, residents face known health risks from the lack of adequate water or wastewater service.

In our report, U.S. Mexico Border Needs Assessment and Support Project: Phase II Assessment Report, we discuss the barriers



OBJECTIVES OF PHASE II COLONIAS INFRASTRUCTURE ASSESSMENT

The objectives of the Phase II assessment are:

- a) To create searchable and sortable database of information on the colonias communities identified in the four-state U.S. border area in the Phase I Scoping Report, including such data as population, general demographics, existing water and waste disposal infrastructure, incidence rate of water borne infectious disease, assessment of access to indoor plumbing, etc.
- b) To develop a colonias database, which includes geospatial information that allows for mapping.
- c) To identify colonias communities that lack access to water and/or waste disposal infrastructure.
- d) To identify those colonias communities and areas of greatest need and where investment will have highest economic and public health impact.
- e) To estimate the capital investment needed in water and waste disposal infrastructure to provide adequate services to communities along the border—including types of facilities required and recommended approaches to providing those services.
- f) To provide information on each community's capacity to apply for funding and to operate, maintain, and manage utilities.
- g) To identify the areas, communities, or utilities where technical assistance is needed and for what purposes.
- h) To identify and recommend approaches for outreach and technical assistance to communities in high needs areas.
- i) To identify local institutions, entities, and community leaders that can serve as points of contact and partners in providing water and waste disposal services in colonia communities of greatest need.

ers that have prevented or are preventing the high-needs colonias from getting the water and wastewater services they require and provides a county-by-county look at the specific challenges facing colonias in the various border counties. The report also contains recommendations for addressing the remaining unmet needs in the colonias, including the need for a robust technical assistance program to build financial, managerial, and technical capacity at the local level in the colonias. It is intended to provide a snapshot in time of the water and wastewater conditions of the 2,177 surveyed colonias at the time of publication and serve as a resource for employees of federal and state agencies, county officials, non-profit organizations, and others who are working to improve the conditions and quality of life in the colonias.

Findings

Considerable progress has been made in providing water and wastewater services to the colonias over the last 25 years. More than 99% of colonia residents have some level of drinking water service, and more than 90% have some level of wastewater service. Dozens of utilities in the target counties have expanded their service areas and taken on other construction projects in a concerted effort to serve the majority of the colonias. Decades of investment by state and federal agencies have greatly improved access to water and wastewater services. Thousands of hours of technical assistance have helped to develop local capacity to finance, construct, operate, and maintain necessary water and wastewater infrastructure. Local leaders in hundreds of colonias have spent countless hours building thriving communities for their families and neighbors. Yet, much work remains to be done.

In the course of our analysis, RCAP identified 130 priority 1 and 474 priority 2 colonias which are collectively the 604 high-needs colonias. The combined population of the high-needs colonias is an estimated 134,419 residents. The majority of residents in the high-needs colonias are unserved or underserved when it comes to drinking water or wastewater services or both. Many drink untreated water from sources with unknown levels of contaminants or water from sources that are known to have contaminant levels that could pose a threat to human health. Others haul water by tank or any conveyance available. Our analysis identified 50 colonias with 3,137 combined residents that are served exclusively by hauled water. In other high-needs colonias there is a lack of permitted wastewater infrastructure. In most cases, the residents in those colonias are likely using unpermitted septic systems, but the lot sizes are frequently too small to support adequate septic systems, and illegal cesspools are not uncommon. Untreated or inadequately treated wastewater has the potential to contaminate shallow or improperly

PRIORITY 1	<p>Communities NOT served by a public water and/or wastewater facility AND A health hazard is (or may) be present</p>
PRIORITY 2	<p>Colonia residents are NOT served by a public water system —no health hazard indicated OR Colonia residents are NOT served by a publicly owned wastewater disposal system, and existing onsite wastewater treatment system is not adequate—no health hazard indicated OR Colonia residents ARE served by publicly owned water and wastewater facilities but one or both are in serious violation of regulations</p>
PRIORITY 3	<p>Some residents are NOT served by a publicly owned water AND/OR Some residents do NOT have access to wastewater service AND Plans are in development and proceeding for financing new water or wastewater services to all areas affected or are currently under construction</p>
PRIORITY 4	<p>Residents ARE served by public water facilities AND Residents are NOT served by public wastewater service, BUT Individual onsite wastewater disposal systems appear to be adequate OR Residents ARE served by BOTH public water service and publicly owned wastewater facilities</p>
PRIORITY 5	<p>The identified colonia does not have any occupied residences, i.e. there are no inhabitants</p>

continued on next page

continued from previous page

constructed water wells that are nearby. In five colonias, the RCAP team documented the continued use of outhouses for wastewater disposal.

As is true for rural infrastructure funding in general in this country, most of the remaining needs are in the smallest, most geographically isolated colonias which lack economies of scale and are difficult and expensive to serve. Some of the high-needs colonias are near to existing utilities where service could be extended and some are clustered together in ways that may make a regional system a cost-effective solution. Others, how-

Serving the truly isolated high-needs colonias will require substantial long-term investments in capacity building through technical assistance and community organizing efforts.

ever, are so inaccessible that it would be prohibitively expensive for an existing utility to serve them. In general, the high-needs colonias lack the institutional capacity to manage a project as large as building, maintaining, or operating a water or wastewater system. Serving the truly isolated high-needs colonias will require substantial long-term investments in capacity building through technical assistance and community organizing efforts and may require the creation of new public water or wastewater systems. For any solution—extending service from an existing utility, forming new regional utilities to serve multiple colonias or solutions specific to an individual colonia—community buy-in is an important consideration that should not be overlooked. After all, once the infrastructure is built and put into operation, it is up to the local community to take care of it. Due to the technical, managerial, and financial capacity constraints in the high-needs colonias, long-term success will not be possible without substantial on-site technical assistance and partnering with other local stakeholders who will continue the effort once the construction crews have left.

As the chart to the next page shows, most of the colonias are priority 4, which generally means that they are served by both water and wastewater. It is important to note, though, that the existence of services only implies that it is sufficient for human consumption. It is not uncommon for the infrastructure to be too small to support economic development efforts or a large employer if the employer's facility requires substantial water or wastewater service. To address the full range of community development needs in the colonias would require a more robust approach to infrastructure development that takes into account potential commercial utility demands.

Further, the existence of water and wastewater infrastructure alone does not necessarily mean that the residents of the colonia are adequately served. As noted above many utility existing systems were designed and built only to meet basic domestic demands. Production, treatment, and distribution/collection capacities may not have taken into account any future growth or potential commercial demands. Existing on-site wastewater treatment systems may not be a permanent solution due to increased densities, small lots, flooding, or poorly constructed and maintained systems.

Common Barriers

Through the course of our data collection activities, including on-site interviews, the RCAP team documented a variety of existing and potential barriers to obtaining service. This is not an exhaustive list, but is illustrative of the most common barriers that continue to make it difficult for colonias to obtain adequate water and wastewater service.

Unwillingness or inability of existing services to provide service

Some utilities will not consider providing services to new customers or unserved areas because they fear that new debt service and/or necessary capital improvements to the physical plant will lead to substantial rate increases for their existing customers. In other cases, utilities may simply not be able to physically provide or extend services to unserved communities.

Planning grants

Prior to extending services into unserved or underserved colonias, planning activities and preliminary engineering studies must be completed. While USDA Rural Development has a program that meets this need, Special Evaluation Assistance for Rural Communities and Households (SEARCH), additional funding would need to be directed to this area to meet the potential demand for numerous such studies over the four state area.

Funding for utility hookups

Even if utilities are able to finance projects to extend water mains or sewer collection lines into the colonias, there is still difficulty in getting residents to hook up to the lines. The cost of hooking up to existing systems is prohibitively high for many low-income colonias residents.

Platting and easements

Not all of the colonias are part of approved subdivision plats nor are there dedicated utility easements within all of the colonias. Going back into colonias to meet platting or other subdivision

requirements and obtain needed easements is a costly and time consuming activity but one that is required prior to extending utility services under current state and local regulations.

Certificated areas and annexation

Over the last thirty years, most of the colonias have been incorporated into the certificated area of utilities or have been annexed by nearby municipalities. However, many of the high-needs colonias prioritized in this report have not been included in these areas. An obstacle therefore is present since utilities will be required to extend their certificated areas or municipalities must be willing to either annex these colonias or provide services within their extra-territorial jurisdictions. In uncertificated areas, where many of the priority colonias are located, a utility would likely be required to obtain an extension of their service area. This process can be a time-consuming and challenging undertaking for a small utility.

Local capacity

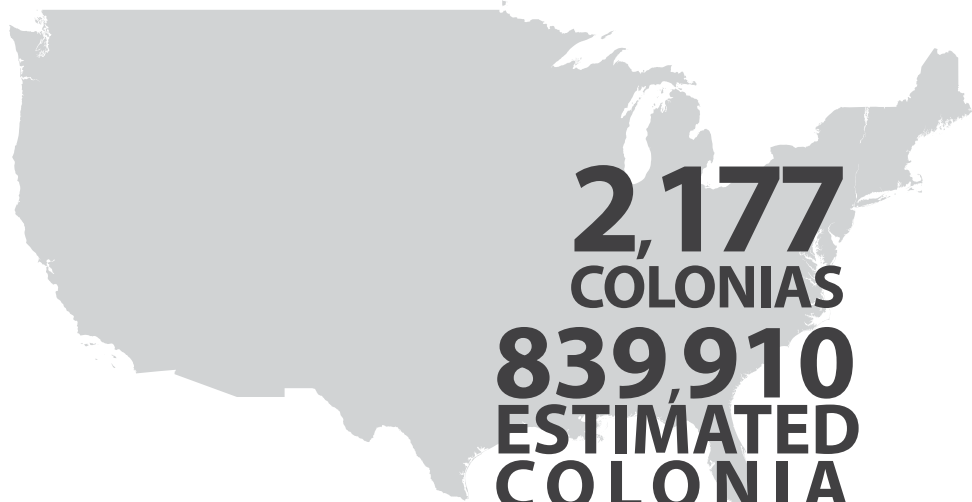
In colonias without any type of infrastructure, capacity has a very profound meaning: the ability to have access to safe drinking water or not. Many of the communities identified as a priority 1 and 2 do not have local capacity. Within the colonia, residents do not possess the technical, financial, and managerial capacity to plan for utility services, to obtain funding for their development, or to operate any type of infrastructure system once constructed.

Water Rights and wholesale water contracts

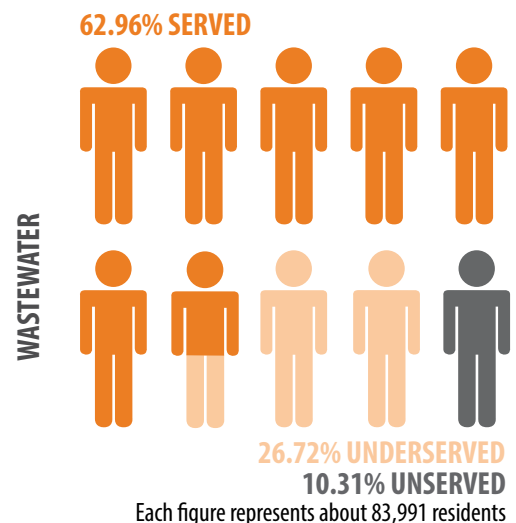
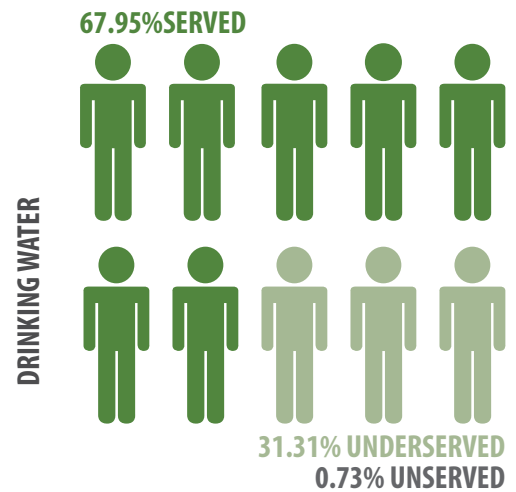
Another issue that can complicate progress and meeting the Letter of Conditions (LOC) under RUS funded projects is water rights. Water rights in prior appropriation states,⁵ which includes all four border states, can significantly impact the time frame and the budget of a project. Both the availability of water rights and reporting requirements can affect project budgets and timeframes.

Affordable housing availability

One concern that indirectly impacts the colonias is the lack of affordable housing in place in the target counties. Many colonia residents work in nearby cities and face long commutes to and from their jobs. The lack of affordable housing in the communities in which they work is a barrier to many low-income colonia residents who would move to live closer to work if they could afford to do so. Most of the cities in the target counties have adequate water and wastewater service, so increasing their stock of affordable housing and allowing colonias residents to relocate there would likely decrease the number of people living without access to safe drinking water and sanitary wastewater services.



2,177
COLONIAS
839,910
ESTIMATED
COLONIA
RESIDENTS



continued on next page

	PRIORITY					TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	
ARIZONA	2	27	25	45	5	104
CALIFORNIA	1	0	1	33	0	35
NEW MEXICO	18	63	6	56	11	154
TEXAS	109	384	123	1,226	42	1,884
TOTAL	130	474	155	1,360	58	2,177



continued from previous page

must understand their own needs, their ability to pay for utility services and the process by which these services are planned, funded, constructed, and maintained. This type of awareness building, organizing, and planning effort is a necessary first step prior to moving on to more focused capacity building.

Assistance in Creating New Service Providers

Wherever possible, every effort should be made to use existing utilities to provide service to unserved colonias. However, there will likely be some situations where there are no nearby water and wastewater service providers or where existing utilities are not willing to extend these services. In these cases a new legal entity with authority to provide water and wastewater services would need to be created. An experienced assistance provider could work with the colonias members to create such an entity.

Developing Capacity

The most common barrier to service in those colonias that remain unserved is a lack of community capacity. In many colonias, there is no legal entity or any type of governance structure in place that could manage and handle the finances for a development project. Even in those with a basic governance structure, there is neither sufficient technical, managerial, or financial (TMF) capacity to oversee a large development project, nor sufficient TMF capacity to operate and maintain a system once it is built. Providing service to these colonias is not possible without first building that local capacity.

Comprehensive Assessment of Existing Utilities

While the work conducted under Phase II provided some information concerning the ability of existing utilities to provide

Recommendations for Phase III

The data clearly shows that much progress has been made. Most, if not all, of the projects to serve colonias that were relatively inexpensive and had few impediments have been completed and the colonias are served. Many of the more challenging and expensive projects have been undertaken or are currently at one stage of development or another. The colonias that remain unserved tend to be far from existing utilities, are in areas with little available water, and/or are in areas with poor groundwater quality that requires expensive treatment. Serving the residents of those colonias will require substantial amounts of time, resources, and technical assistance. Fully funded, targeted technical assistance and training delivered by experienced professionals can alleviate or mitigate most of the barriers identified previously. Other barriers, such as available funding programs, are beyond the scope of technical assistance and will require state or federal action. The following discussion explores in more detail the types of technical assistance that should be made available to provide reliable services for the priority colonias.

Supporting Infrastructure

Before we can even begin to address the water and wastewater needs on a community level, there are other basic needs that must be met in some of the colonias in the target counties. Reliable roads and electricity are prerequisites for extending community water or wastewater services.

Community Involvement and Planning

For those colonias that are unserved and potentially out of reach of existing utilities, a comprehensive and inclusive process should be adopted that involves community members, local elected officials, representatives from available funders, and technical assistance providers (TAPs). Community members

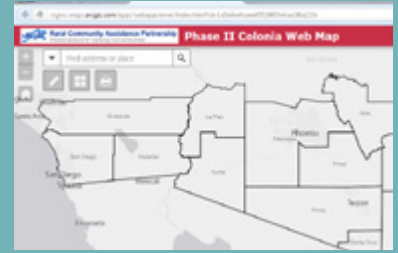


for and extend services to colonias, a comprehensive assessment should be conducted for those utilities in areas where it is feasible for service extensions to be made in order to provide first time or improved water and wastewater services for the high-needs colonias. Such an assessment can identify potential weaknesses and target technical assistance and training to meet those needs. Some of this will likely be directed at financial issues, such as accessing funding sources for providing needed services to colonias.

Consideration of Alternative or Regionalized Service Delivery Approaches

Given that many of the unserved colonias are located in remote areas or are too distant from existing utilities to provide for service/collection line extensions, alternative delivery approaches should be evaluated and pursued where feasible. One approach is to encourage county governments to plan for the provision of service to isolated colonias. Another approach would be to evaluate the feasibility of a regional service provider that could not only provide first time service to colonias but also take advantage of opportunities ranging from the sharing of services among smaller utilities to actual consolidation of existing service providers. Since it is necessary to design service delivery approaches that meet unique community and geographic needs, regionalized approaches must be considered, in part to take advantage of potential economies of scale. Entities that provide services over a larger geographic area oftentimes can take advantage of an ability to provide other needed community services, such as for solid waste, housing, and economic development, all of which can assist the communities to become more resilient and self-sustaining.

Check out our interactive map of colonias at tinyurl.com/ColoniasPublic



Planning Grants

Virtually all of the high-needs colonias do not have the funds to initiate the process of accessing state or federal financing sources. Preliminary planning and engineering studies, required by funding sources, and other technical assistance needs are beyond the financial abilities of low-income colonias residents. Programs such as the USDA-RD's SEARCH grant program are one solution. This program would need to receive additional funding in order to meet the needs of the high-needs colonias identified in this report. Other state and federal funding sources should consider the adoption of similar programs that facilitate access to long-term financing options for colonias and communities/utilities in need.

Coordinating Technical Assistance with Funding, Regulatory, Local, and Community Development Entities

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of water and wastewater services for colonias will require coordination among all pertinent groups involved in utility and community development for the designated colonias. The primary assistance provider should collaborate with local entities, local elected officials, and community support groups to ensure that all resources are being brought to bear on creating long-term solutions. The assistance provider must be familiar with all of the state and federal infrastructure funding programs and the staff that administer these programs. Especially in those counties where there are large numbers of high-needs colonias, regular meetings among the parties involved should be held in order to further collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources.

Colonias Designation

There is no one standard definition for a colonia that is used by both state and federal agencies. There is a need for a standard definition, especially among federal government agencies in order to improve clarity and equity among the various programs. Also, as detailed in our assessment, many of the colonias are no longer in need of infrastructure support and therefore a process of un-designating the community as a colonia is also needed for adoption by both federal and state governments. ■

Stewart is the Executive Director of RCAP. Neumann is the Policy Director in the RCAP National Office.

Letter from the Field

by Veronica Bitting

My two years of service with Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP) has certainly forced me to branch out, grow, and begin interpreting many acronyms formerly unknown to me. A traditional housing and fund development professional, I never thought I'd learn so much about the relationship between housing, clean water access, and water quality. To say that I have been allowed a tremendous opportunity to learn and grow is an understatement. Personally, I have gained so much more as a result of accepting challenges and wholeheartedly advocating for and with those who consistently desire and literally fight for a basic human right. I am now convinced that WATER IS LIFE.

Very early in my tenure as a Technical Assistance Provider, I vigorously and adamantly sought knowledge, information, and experience from various natives and residents of rural North Carolina communities faced with tremendous wastewater and drinking water challenges. One of the most enlightening experiences involved residents of the Rogers Eubanks Neighborhood Association, less than five miles south of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

David Caldwell, Jr., a resident of the Rogers Road area since the age of 8, has been at the forefront of addressing environmental injustice and water quality issues since 1973. After college at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), David Caldwell, Jr. followed in the footsteps of his father, one of Orange County's first African American law Enforcement Officers, in joining Orange County as a Sheriff's Deputy. His leadership and the community's endurance have resulted in the planned connection of every one of the eighty-six homes in the area to public sewer, a project that is currently underway.

Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) Civil Engineer & Project Manager, Jeremy Fireline, P.E., facilitated the comprehensive unveiling of the \$6 million proposal that guarantees municipal sewer to the entire Historic Rogers Eubanks Neighborhood. Over 119 residents of the area attended the July 28, 2015 evening meeting. The project began on August 4, 2015 and is estimated to take up to three years, and the decision to construct a pump sta-

tion (electricity driven) versus a gravity fed option (free natural flow) will be that of the residents once the education and information sessions and preliminary designs are completed in 2016. Travis Myren, Orange County's Deputy Manager reminded all present that the process of easements and their locations have not been decided and will, of course, include input from residents. In addition, sidewalks and other beautification projects will be installed. Land surveyors visited property owners on August 4, 2015 and gathered property boundaries. Residents of Rogers Eubanks are excited to participate with OWASA in the environmental review process and marking local wetlands.

One of my many non-traditional learning experiences I've experienced includes skillfully and practically determining where a community or township is, how far the community's leadership is willing to proceed, and their comfort levels relative to managing projects, activities, and funding. I have also concluded that two years is a very short time period to build relationships and trust in fledgling communities and townships and suggest next steps. Successful projects and activities typically must form from a 'bottom up' approach. Real community economic development progress always starts within. I have often been reminded either verbally or otherwise, that the ultimate decision to move forward, move quickly, or remain still/stagnant is that of the community's leadership.

I certainly look forward to partnering with rural communities, encountering challenges, and advocating and assisting communities and townships as they seek to improve environmental conditions, quality drinking water, and access to improved wastewater disposal and other recycling. My ultimate goal is to ensure that each community, in its own time and at its own pace, is empowered and informed, controlling its own water resources and destiny. ■

Veronica Bitting is a Technical Assistance Provider with Southeast RCAP.

RCAP Staff Meet in Memphis

by Breanna Detwiler

RCAP staff from across the country gathered in Memphis, Tennessee November 16-19th to connect and learn from leaders in the field and each other at the annual RCAP National Training Conference. The program kicked off with opening remarks from Ines Polonius, CEO of Communities Unlimited (CU), who welcomed the group to Memphis. Following her remarks, Scotty Sorrells, of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation discussed RCAP work in Tennessee and Jacqueline M. Ponti-Lazaruk, Assistant Administrator for Water and Environment Programs, USDA Rural Development spoke on the role of Rural Development in communities and steps RD is taking to strengthen programs.

Robert Stewart, RCAP's Executive Director, welcomed RCAP staff and guests and reflected on the progress made since last year's conference. RCAP National Office staff updated the network on new technologies being introduced, such as a new database system, portal, and website. Ari Neuman, RCAP's Policy Director, closed the morning session with a presentation on rural advocacy and advancing the RCAP cause at the State and Federal level.

Opening remarks were followed by the annual RCAP Awards Luncheon. The following staff were recognized for their dedication and service to RCAP's mission to ensure that rural and small communities throughout the US have access to safe drinking water and sanitary wastewater disposal:

- Patrick Walker (SERCAP), Outstanding Service Award
- Candace Balmer (RCAP Solutions), The Bill French Bridge-Builder Award
- Carol Rosset (RCAC), Pillar Award
- Scott Mueller (RCAP Solutions), Outstanding Mentor Award
- Allen McEntire (SERCAP), Outstanding Rookie Award

Harold Hunter (CU) and Chris Fierros (MAP) were inducted into the RCAP Hall of Fame (pictured at right).

Over the following 3 days, 160 RCAP Technical Assistance Providers (TAPs) participated in training sessions on everything from Solid Waste to Collecting Data for a Water Audit. Outside of session rooms, RCAP staff enjoyed the blues and barbeque on Beale Street and Memphis' famous hospitality

Motivated by speakers and armed with new training information, the conference reinvigorated RCAP staff to tackle the challenges facing rural communities today. ■

Middle Photo (from left back to front right): RCAP Hall of Fame recipients Mark Rounsavall (CU), Jerry Kopke (CU), Harold Hunter (CU), Joe Dvorak (MAP), RCAP Executive Director Robert Stewart, Deb Martin (GLRCAP), Julie Ward (GLRCAP), Chris Fierros (MAP), and Sukhwindar Singh (RCAP Solutions).

Detwiler is the Communications Director in the RCAP National Office in Washington, DC.



Pictured above: Tommy Ricks (CU) and Rachel Silver (SERCAP) catch up in between conference sessions.



1701 K Street NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006

PRSR STD
U.S. Postage
Paid
Permit No. 382
Dulles, VA

a drop of KNOWLEDGE

RCAP's email newsletter



**This is why
clean water
is so important.**

**Get the newsletter
that helps you
provide it.**

The residents of your community depend on receiving a reliable supply of clean, safe water. You as a leader of your water system want to provide water that is safe enough for your own family.

To help you in this vital function for your community, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership provides a free electronic newsletter – A Drop of Knowledge

Each issue is delivered to your email inbox every month and provides practical information for operating or managing your water system – not too much to be overwhelming, but just enough to make a difference.

To subscribe, visit
www.rcap.org/DoKsubscribe