



SMALL WATER USERS ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

O.K., this is not really much of a newsletter, because there is really very little news to report as of the beginning of June. Let's instead call it a report on where things stand on our five year anniversary. The Small Water Users Association of BC (SWUABC) was formed as a non-profit society in 2003 by myself and several other managers/operators of small water systems in the West Kootenays. The idea behind the Association was to provide a 'voice' for small rural water systems with government, and to serve as a clearing-house for information and advice to its members.

But first a bit of history as to how the Association came into being: Several years earlier I had been the bookkeeper /manager /'operator' of the Longbeach Water Users' Community, which supplied untreated water from a creek to 39 properties along the north shore of Kootenay Lake just east of Nelson. The system was jointly owned by all of the property owners. The term 'operator' is loosely applied, since my only duties involved draining the accumulated sediment from the bottom of two concrete storage tanks back into the creek about once a week, or occasionally unplugging a debris jam above the water intake. The entire works, including the distribution lines, had been installed without a construction permit (one was subsequently approved retroactively). For several years in the late 1990's water samples had been provided to Interior Health, with results frequently indicating fairly high counts of total coliform and/or Ecoli. We stopped providing samples after that because it didn't seem to serve any purpose. The system had no operating permit at that time, and had been on a boil advisory for as far back as anyone could recall.

Curiously (to me because I had always taken 'safe' water for granted living in large cities), no one on the Longbeach system seemed to mind at all that the water was considered unsafe to drink (or even, in most cases, believed it to be unsafe). Most had been drinking it for years straight from the tap, a few others like myself used bottled water for drinking purposes, and one family actually boiled their drinking water. The annual water fee was very low (\$120.00/year), and there was strong opposition to fee increases, as well as to treatment, particularly if it involved the use of chlorine.

At that time I don't believe that anybody involved with the system knew of the British Columbia Water & Waste Association, the EOCP, operator training

requirements, the specifics of the drinking water legislation, or which engineering companies or suppliers had experience designing and installing treatment technology. We simply had little notion of where to go for help, and the idea of asking Interior Health for assistance did not seem to be a popular one. But the key point is that, bottom line, nobody wanted to change a thing!

During discussions with the managers of several other water systems, I came to realize that we were not alone; indeed there were numerous systems, nearby, some quite large, that were more or less exactly like Longbeach. During these discussions it became apparent that many small systems in the area were facing difficulties in financing needed infrastructure improvements, understanding the legal requirements, selecting appropriate technology, finding qualified operators, and generally in managing their systems, which was usually done on a volunteer basis. We concluded that there was a need for an association to represent such systems, and SWUABC was incorporated as a non-profit society. The BC Ministry of Health and the Interior Health Authority generously provided some initial funding to enable us to equip a home office and undertake initial membership recruitment.

At that time (spring 2003) I was unaware that there were any other water associations in BC (there were four), or that the situation I have described at Longbeach and at nearby water systems was in fact quite prevalent throughout the province, (e.g. there were then some 390 systems on a boil advisory).

Five years later it seems that little has changed. The reported number of systems on a boil advisory in BC has risen to over 500 (the real number would be much higher since many small untreated systems are unknown to the authorities). The five health authorities are requesting even more comprehensive treatment, particularly for surface water (e.g. 4 log reduction of viruses, 3 log for Crypto & Giardia, 2 treatment methods, etc.). While few people would argue with the goal of providing safe drinking water, some might take issue with the government's definition of 'safe'. Although financial assistance for infrastructure improvements continues to be made available to municipal and regional district water systems, no such help is available for most small rural systems.

On the other hand, many small system owners/managers have done little to help themselves. Water fees are all too often absurdly low (as indicated in the questionnaire results to follow), and little effort is made to accrue the funds needed to install adequate treatment. Many systems cannot even afford the cost of an engineering proposal. To some extent this situation is a result of the widespread *laissez-faire* attitude on the part of many drinking water officers, who have permitted boil orders to remain in place for many years. An attitude I frequently encounter is: "they have been telling us for years that we have to treat the water, but our users don't want to spend the money. We intend to continue as before until we think they are getting serious." This attitude is frequently exacerbated by the belief that their untreated water source is completely safe, or by the largely unfounded concerns about the adverse effects of chlorination.

After attending a number of water industry trade shows and meeting with numerous engineering firms and equipment suppliers, I have concluded that for

most water sources relatively inexpensive treatment options are usually available providing one knows where to go for sound advice. Often, however, the small system has difficulty locating someone qualified to design and install such treatment facilities, or else ends up with a proposal that, while offering an excellent technical solution, is overly expensive and thus is ultimately rejected. The all too frequent insistence by public health engineers on having an engineer's stamp on the drawings can also drive up costs considerably, particularly for very small systems.

To further complicate matters, the issue of operator qualifications, responsibility and liability is introduced once treatment is put in place. With an untreated system on a boil advisory, the users are at least aware that the water they drink may potentially be dangerous and can choose to take appropriate precautions. However once treatment is installed the users will assume that the water is always safe, which places the onus (and much of the liability) on the operator to ensure that this is so. Large systems with several operators and higher levels of training and certification can usually cope with this responsibility, but it is a lot to ask of a volunteer operator for a very small system. It is perhaps only because the risk of serious illness is really quite small that BC has not experienced any (attributed) fatalities involving people on small systems.

To be fair to the government, I have come to realize that the five health authorities face a very difficult challenge in enforcing the drinking water protection legislation. With limited resources, a huge population of water systems to deal with (over 5000 that fall under the provisions of the Drinking Water Protection Act), and facing challenges to get even many large municipal and regional district systems to comply with their treatment expectations, the very small systems tend to get overlooked or ignored. Some of the health authorities have had more success than others in dealing with this challenge, as became evident during the workshops we put on during the past four years. But the bottom line, in my view, is that there has been a widespread failure on the part of government in general to follow through on their stated intention that all citizens of British Columbia shall have access to a supply of potable drinking water.

The primary function of the SWUABC is to provide advice to our members and others via our website, newsletters, workshops and by telephone or email. While we do not attempt to answer technical questions, we are usually able to refer you to someone who can. It is never our intention to in any way oppose the work of the drinking water officers, but rather to assist them to promote a responsible attitude and action by water purveyors leading to the provision of safe drinking water by all water systems throughout the province. However I have to admit that progress has been slow and frustrating, and that much more needs to be done by government, the various water associations and the water purveyors themselves if we are going to achieve this goal.

WORKSHOPS

In 2008 we plan to put on four one day workshops in cooperation with Interior Health, Fraser Health and Vancouver Island Health. The tentative dates and locations are :

September 18	100 Mile House
October 20	Campbell River
October 22	Duncan
October 27	Abbotsford

We anticipate that each workshop will qualify for 0.6 CEUs (continuing education credits) to enable operators to maintain their EOCP certification. Invitations and registration forms will be sent to all members this summer once we have finalized the venues and agendas for each of the workshops.

Our annual general meeting will take place at one of the workshops (probably Abbotsford). Once again, we are seeking people willing to be nominated as Directors. Directors' duties are not time-consuming ; mostly we are looking for people who can assist with ideas and advice to improve the services we deliver, and to occasionally assist at the regional workshops. If you are willing to put forward your name, or nominate someone else whom you think might be interested, please let us know.

NEW AFFILIATE MEMBERS

We would like to welcome the following two companies as new affiliate members of the Association :

HETEK Solutions Inc.
Capri Insurance Services Ltd.

All members are encouraged to go to the 'suppliers/consultants' link on our website and scroll down the list to view the products and services which each can offer to your water system.

MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

Our last newsletter contained a one page questionnaire designed to obtain some general information on our member water systems. We received 66 responses (an excellent 28% response rate), and would like to thank all those members who took the time to complete the questionnaire. The following is a summary of the results obtained :

Annual water fee per residential user (connection):

Average water fee paid:	\$275.00 (of 42 responses)
Highest annual fee:	\$800.00
Lowest annual fee:	\$0

Number of systems reporting no treatment: 41

Number of systems on a boil order: 25 (38%) ❶

Operators:

No operator:	17 systems
Operator:	48 systems (73%)
EOCP certified operator:	40 systems (60%)
BCWWA SWS course:	38
BCWWA level 1 course:	2
TRU course:	1
Other course:	1
Average annual remuneration:	\$6,740 (36 operators) ❷

Liability Insurance:

Systems with liability insurance:	25 (39%)
Systems without insurance:	39 (61%)
Average premium (22 who reported):	\$3,692 ❸
Highest Premium:	\$6,500
Lowest Premium:	\$1,200

Notes:

- ❶ Several responders were not aware that their system is on a current boil order.
- ❷ 16 operators were unpaid volunteers. If these are excluded, the average remuneration of the remaining 20 (paid operators) was \$12,132
- ❸ The premium information provided should be viewed with extreme caution. Policies vary in coverage, limitations, exclusions, etc., and are not really comparable.

Question 16 asked what kinds of information or assistance a small water system would like to receive from our Association. Many responders left this question blank. Of those who did respond, the suggestions can be grouped as follows (in order of frequency):

1. Continue lobbying the government for financial assistance (grants or loans) for infrastructure (advocacy):

17

2. Information on government regulation changes, government directions, etc. that impact small water systems:	8
3. Technical advice (product information, treatment options, help line, etc.):	11
4. More workshops:	7
5. Insurance news/advice:	5
6. Newsletters:	5
7. Training courses (to obtain CEUs):	3
8. Regional chapters of the Association (corresponding to the Health Authority regions):	1
9. Information on water fees and audit costs:	1
10. What RDs can do for SWS	1
11. Information on metering	1

NOTICE OF MOVE

Please take note that we have recently moved our office to the address shown at the top of the newsletter. Our telephone/telefax number has also changed (250-825-4308), however the email address remains the same.

“With respect to water, Canadians and Americans suffer from the same disease: we say that it is priceless, but act as if it were absurdly cheap.”
-editorial, Toronto Globe & Mail