Grumbles
on water

By Benjamin H. Grumbles

Helping Small Systems

U.S. EPA provides new management tool for small systems

It is no secret that small systems face unique financial and operational challenges in providing drinking water and treating wastewater to meet U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards.

Given their small customer base, many small systems cannot develop or access the technical, managerial and financial resources needed to comply with the increasing number of EPA regulations and rising customer expectations. These water systems may be geographically isolated. Their staffs often lack the time or expertise to make needed infrastructure repairs, install or operate treatment and develop comprehensive source water protection plans, financial plans or asset management plans.

In response, EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson announced a new, important and free management tool for small drinking water and wastewater systems at the National Rural Water Association Rally in April. Known as the Check Up Program for Small Systems (CUPSS), this program is user-friendly and computer-based, assisting owners and operators in developing and using plans for maintaining their systems and providing service to their customers.

The goals of CUPSS are to assist with communication between utility staff and decision makers; help move utilities from crisis management to informed decision making; facilitate more efficient and focused utility operations; and improve financial management to make the best use of limited resources.

The software program uses information provided about a system's assets, operation and maintenance activities and financial status to produce a prioritized asset inventory, financial reports and a customized asset management plan. Asset management is a process for maintaining a desired level of customer service at the best appropriate cost. Asset management programs support informed budget discussions, boost efficiency of a utility and improve customer service by ensuring clean and safe water at competitive prices.

Program Development

The EPA's National Water Program developed CUPSS as part of the agency's Sustainable Infrastructure Initiative, which promotes better management practices, efficient water use, full-cost pricing of water and a watershed approach to sustain our nation's water infrastructure. The CUPSS was developed with the help of a workgroup that included representatives from state agencies, technical assistance organizations, EPA regional offices and small wastewater and drinking water utilities. With this collaborative approach, a comprehensive application was developed to provide all the tools required to implement an asset management program and develop effective asset management plans.

To date, 20 small public water and wastewater systems in eight states—Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Virginia—have volunteered to pilot test the CUPSS application. Each drinking water and wastewater system uses a different approach to asset management, ranging from a semi-established program to no program at all. Additionally, each of these systems has been assigned volunteer expert technical assistance providers to help implement the pilot program.

For more information, visit www.epa.gov/safewater/cupss/casestudies.html. More details about these systems and their experiences in the pilot program will be added to the EPA website over time.

Is CUPSS Right for You?

Consider this: The primary user community for CUPSS is comprised of small drinking water and wastewater utilities with fewer than 1,000 connections or 3,300 individuals. Larger utilities new to asset management, however, might also find CUPSS useful.

For more information on CUPSS, including program downloads and ordering information, visit www.epa.gov/cupss. The EPA's recently updated website for small public water systems is also available at www.epa.gov/safewater/smallsystems, and a full list of CUPSS training opportunities is available at www.epa.gov/safewater/cupss/training.html.

The EPA is committed to helping small water and wastewater systems and providing comprehensive support through publications, training and technical and financial assistance. States and technical assistance providers also offer complementary support that directly targets state- or system-specific needs and concerns.

It is the EPA's goal that CUPSS, with the support of agency partners, will make a difference and help bridge the financial gap that many small drinking water and wastewater systems face as they repair and replace our nation's aging water infrastructure. The cup is not half empty—it is more than half full, particularly with new tools such as CUPSS. WWD

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