By Hilary Currey

Ready, Set, Network

You hear it all the time—networking is a prime component to achieving success. But what exactly is networking? Why is it effective for some but not others? What is all the squawking about?

We can look to geese for some of the answers. The goose does not fly south for the winter alone; he brings friends to embark upon the adventure together. Then the geese coordinate, and the whole group finds the most efficient way to get south. Geese fly in a "V" formation and each goose takes a turn in the lead position. By this formation, experts say, they achieve 71% greater flying range than if each flew on its own.

The geese rely on a sense of common direction, community and teamwork. When one gets tired, he flies to the back of the wing but is still part of the group, and the geese honk from behind to encourage the leader to keep up the good work.

I&I Alliance

One recent example of this effective collaboration tool brought back from the field was the network created between the cities of Thorne Bay and Craig in southeastern Alaska. The city of Thorne Bay was experiencing inflow and infiltration (I&I) problems and issued a call for assistance.

The city's public works director said that during the rainstorm season, Thorne Bay was seeing wastewater flow in at a rate of 40,000 to 250,000 gal per day, costing the city an estimated $40,000 more a year in treatment costs. The city of Craig stepped up and provided Thorne Bay with what it needed in order to get back online, showing that wastewater service does not have to stop when you have a plugged line or other operation problem.

The cities also utilized the expertise of an operator from the city of Ketchikan, Ala., in their attempt to address the I&I issues, and his assistance proved a valuable tool in their efforts. During this process, Thorne Bay was able to pass along education by inviting operators from the neighboring village of Klawock to observe and obtain the knowledge needed to minimize the I&I problem that often plagued their wastewater system as well.

In two days time, using Quad Plug to address the visible and obvious inflow areas, the team was able to reduce the flow by 80% and bring significant cost reduction to Thorne Bay. This is a perfect example of operator-to-operator professional collaboration—technician networking that proves to be effective and priceless.

A new venture with smoke testing—utilizing the camaraderie that stemmed from this event and Alaska Rural Water Association's wastewater circuit rider—is scheduled to take place in September.

In Case of Emergency

Networking does not stop with operators in the water industry; it can involve the people who are funded to provide technical assistance and training in collaboration with water and wastewater utility groups. In Alaska, a group of technical assistance providers and utility groups recently formed a productive group stemming from the national Water and Wastewater Agency Response Network (WARN) called AK-WARN. The main focus of this group is to establish a network of utilities helping other utilities to respond to and recover from emergencies.

WARN groups provide a method where water and wastewater utilities that have sustained or anticipate damages from natural or human-caused incidents can

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provide and receive emergency aid and assistance from other utilities in the form of personnel, equipment, materials and other associated services as needed. The objective is to provide rapid, short-term deployment of emergency services to restore the critical operations of an affected water or wastewater utility.

The backbone of the WARN concept is the Mutual Aid and Assistance Agreement, in which provisions for network activation, reimbursement, liability and other issues are mutually agreed on by participating utilities. Participation is voluntary; there is no obligation to respond and no direct cost to become a network member.

The WARN framework provides a forum for establishing and maintaining emergency contacts, provides expedited access to specialized resources needed to respond to and recover from utility-disrupting emergencies and facilitates training that focuses specifically on the exchange of resources during an emergency.

Events such as 9/11, hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the recent earthquake in China have identified a need for water and wastewater utilities to create intrastate mutual-aid and assistance programs because:

- Utilities require specialized resources to sustain operations;
- Government response agencies and other critical infrastructure rely on water supplies;
- Utilities must provide their own support in the immediate aftermath of an incident, as state and federal resources likely will not be available or deployed for up to 72 hours;
- Large events impact regional areas, making response from adjacent utilities impractical;
- Disasters impact utility employees and their families, creating greater need for relief;
- Agreements must be established and in place prior to an incident for federal reimbursement eligibility; and
- Engagement in mutual-aid and assistance supports Department of Homeland Security requirements for compliance with the National Incident Management System.

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Look to the Geese

Effective networking can make a substantial difference for water and wastewater systems everywhere. Every system should be able to call others, ask what type of system they run and visit one another's systems. This type of networking in the water and wastewater field is a good way to enlarge a utility's support network and profit from others' experiences.

Let's look to the geese and the effective way they have developed their networking skills. When one part of the group is successful, the entire group achieves success.

The key to effective networking is to find the groups with which your group has common ground and create a setting in which you might discuss ways of supporting one another. When several individuals, agencies and systems work together, the water and wastewater industry can form groups that affect change and create action. WWD

Hilary Currey is executive director for the Alaska Rural Water Association. Currey can be reached by e-mail at hilary_currey@arwa.org.

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