

small systems, big needs



Neda Simeonova, editorial director
nsimeonova@sgcmail.com

Rural and small systems are a big part of our water and wastewater infrastructure. Specifically, more than 94% of the nation's 156,000 public water systems serve fewer than 3,300 people, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Unfortunately, a large number of these systems would have to undergo extensive upgrades in order to meet population demands and to comply with the increasing number of EPA regulations.

When it comes to small systems, the one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work, as each facility faces unique financial and operational challenges in providing water and wastewater services.

Some of the main challenges are directly related to the basic factors that define these systems: location and customer base. A significant portion of small systems are located in remote, isolated geographical locations and have a small customer base. This alone limits systems' access to technical and financial resources needed to comply with existing requirements. To make matters worse, many small systems have small staffs that

lack the manpower and sometimes even the expertise to address specific maintenance and upgrade needs. Most of all, funding opportunities are especially limited.

But it is not all gloom and doom. In August 2010, the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, a leading resource for rural people and communities, announced that it has awarded 67 grants totaling \$5.2 million to create jobs and address clean water needs throughout the state. These grants will assist communities in 46 rural counties and create 375 jobs. Some of the water and sewer projects include:

- A \$120,000 project for Anson County that will increase water and sewer service for a new business and create 12 jobs;
- A \$140,000 project that will extend the city of Asheboro water and sewer service to the new location of an expanding manufacturer of machine products in Randolph County. The project is expected to create 14 jobs; and
- A \$355,000 project for Gates County that will develop the wastewater infrastructure to serve new businesses, including an assisted living facility and insurance office, committing to a 200-acre location. This funding augments a previous grant to extend sewer service to a recreational facility in the same area and increases the creation of new jobs from 35 to 70.

While this is just one example that certainly doesn't reflect the state of all other small systems across the country, it is important to note that solutions—even if limited—do exist.

There are many federal programs designed to help state and local officials identify potential funding sources; offer technical assistance to help small communities plan, design and build water and wastewater systems; and identify appropriate contacts and application processes. This month's *WWD* Operation & Management section on page 18 discusses how technical assistance providers can help small communities.

By working together, federal and state agencies, along with small communities, can identify solutions to help meet small systems' big needs.

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