

small systems: NEW TUNE TO AN OLD SONG



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Not much has changed for small and rural systems across the U.S. Commenting on this topic brings a strange sense of déjà vu. What's more disturbing is that while researching information on the challenges small systems face in today's economy, I came across articles and documents dating back to the 1970s—and possibly older—that spell out the same problems: inadequate financing, meeting existing and new regulations, operations and maintenance burdens, lack of customer support and so on. Apparently, the same challenges that plagued small systems more than 35 years ago are still leaving their mark on communities across the nation.

Unfortunately, these issues have ballooned during the economic decline of the past three years, impacting budget plans and further threatening critical water and wastewater infrastructure improvements for large and small systems alike.

Small systems, however, are more likely to fail to address needed repairs and replacements, and they are more likely to experience technical, managerial and funding challenges. This

affects their capacity to provide safe drinking water, which in turn leads to public health concerns.

It is an all too familiar tune ... so how can we help remedy this decades-old problem?

Some experts propose consolidation of systems in various forms, such as complete system mergers or line connections for emergency backup and even personnel sharing.

While combining financial, water and human resources may offer a temporary solution to some small systems, the truth remains: The most pressing issue for small systems is funding.

With a small customer base, rate increases can carry a number of additional challenges.

Financing in the form of grants specifically for communities with low-income customers who cannot absorb the cost of water infrastructure improvements seems to offer some answers, but we all have seen grants opportunities evaporate, especially in the last few years.

Fortunately, small systems have received some political attention in recent years. According to www.whitehouse.gov, which offers information about the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Water and Waste Disposal loan and grant program used recovery act funds to build drinking water, sanitary sewer, solid waste and storm drainage facilities specifically for rural communities of 10,000 or fewer people. The program was designed to provide financing for water and waste infrastructure when commercial credit is unavailable at reasonable rates, allowing rural communities to provide safe, reasonably priced services to their residents. Although it may seem like a drop in the bucket, the program has resulted in the startup of 200 new water and wastewater system projects throughout rural America.

This month's issue of *WWD* features a Special Section on small and rural systems (see pages 32 to 35) that discusses how some U.S. and international towns are managing their water supplies, finding ways to save on energy costs and delivering quality services to their customers.

And even though we don't have all the solutions to this decades-old problem, one thing is certain—there is help available for rural water systems, so don't tune out this old song just yet.

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