

President's Comments

By Al Parrella

We had a change of leadership in Washington, and changes are promised at the EPA. Is our industry at a crossroads?

The Clean Water Act of 1972 set the foundation for much of the wastewater collection and treatment systems that we have taken for granted, both as members of the public, and as a source of employment as we work our way through our careers. Just think of all of the changes in the last 45 years. We have watched new kinds of process equipment come into existence and evolve; we have seen the development of innovative, extremely clever technologies for such things as nutrient harvesting, ammonia removal, and sludge conditioning; there are new and ever more reliable methods for pipe repair; etc., etc. We in our industry have also evolved. We have learned how to optimize our plants to adapt to changing permit standards, and we have learned to work safely. (When I started my career in 1979, wastewater treatment was one of the most hazardous industries; now it is one of the safest.) Because of our work we have opened up previously unusable waterways for recreation and development. We have improved public health and the environment. We have come to be taken for granted. Indeed, any 20-something year old in any given city in Minnesota has grown up with (or should have grown up with) responsible waste management. Not so years ago.

Who profits from our industry? Everyone does. We work; we get a paycheck. We buy goods and services, both at home and at work. We buy power from the power companies to run our pump stations and treatment plants. We buy pipe, and pumps, and valves; chemicals, and chemical feed systems; control systems and programming; engineering services, and other things. Wastewater research, engineering, construction, operation, maintenance and (yes) regulation employ a lot of people.

What about members of the general public, who don't work directly in the industry? Their benefit is a cleaner environment. I doubt that there is any chance that they would want to go backwards. Nobody can predict the future, but in general when something gets big enough it seems to take on a life of its own. For this reason I would not anticipate any major easing of regulations. It will probably be increasingly more difficult to get the funding for the large-scale upgrades and construction projects that we might plan. However, with promises to substantially address and upgrade failing infrastructure we might just be pleasantly surprised.

I for one am looking forward to the changes and challenges that our industry will present. If I've learned anything in my career, it is that we need to be resourceful in meeting the challenges ahead. Learning to adapt will make us more knowledgeable and therefore more enduring as an industry.

