

OKLAHOMA RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION

Every time a person living in the Oklahoma countryside gets a drink of cool, clean water from their tap, they can thank the Oklahoma Rural Water Association for helping to provide it. The agency has been offering training, technical assistance, and other services to rural water districts since the 1970s. Today, it is very proud to be in its fourth decade of service to rural areas.

Prior to 1963 people living in rural areas in Oklahoma had to forage for drinking water from wells, ponds, and other dubious sources. Unfortunately, that water was often unsafe to drink and posed a host of health risks. Without a remedy for the problem, many people would have been forced out of the countryside and into bigger cities and towns where potable water was readily available.

In an effort to provide safe water to country dwellers, a network of rural water districts was created in Oklahoma and throughout the nation in 1963. The "Sooner State's" first rural water district began operating the following year in 1964. Others soon sprang up in the state's seventy-seven counties.

The newly created water districts did more than just provide clean water to residents, however. They also indirectly contributed to the economic development of rural areas. With safe drinking water readily available, rural areas became more attractive to outside businesses. That in turn led to an improved quality of life for residents as additional service providers and retailers set up shop in the countryside. There's no question that the systems had a positive impact on the overall health and well-being of rural dwellers.

However, the network of water systems ran into its share of stumbling blocks. The main problem was that each new system required at least one certified operator, but there simply weren't enough to go around.

That predicament prompted the districts to join forces and create the Oklahoma Rural Water Association (ORWA) in 1970. In those early days, the ORWA focused solely on providing training for operators who needed certification. By 1976 the association had added on-site



The ORWA offices in Oklahoma City.

technical assistance to its services. Oklahoma's comprehensive training and assistance program proved so successful that the National Rural Water Association used it as a model for its own nationwide program.

Since its debut in the 1960s, the number of rural water districts in Oklahoma has continued to rise. Today, there are approximately 400 districts throughout the state ranging in size from twenty to 6,000 customers each. Together they boast a total of 600,000 customers who use an average of 5,500 to 6,000 gallons of water per month. That amounts to millions and millions of gallons of water every month.

The ORWA has expanded in conjunction with the increase in districts. From its originally lean staff of only three employees in the early 1970s, it has grown to twenty-one full-time staffers who now handle drinking water, wastewater systems, ground water, and source water protection. To meet the changing needs of its expanding membership, the association has introduced several new services. However, state-approved classroom training, field training, and on-site technical assistance are still mainstays of the non-profit association. Last year the ORWA provided approximately 2,000 hours of training and made more than 4,000 on-site technical assistance visits.

Aside from training, the ORWA has taken an advocacy role to promote rural water system development and to enhance the image of water and sewage systems in Oklahoma. The association promotes cooperation among water districts and acts as a clearinghouse for information to its members. It also works to protect systems from excessive and discriminatory taxes, fees, and assessments. According to Gene Whatley, the agency's executive director who has been on staff at the ORWA since 1978, that is one of the services it offers that customers appreciate most.

"Probably the most important issue facing water systems today is the increasing number of federal regulations," Whatley says. "The additional requirements often come with a cost that makes affordability a problem for smaller systems. It's a big concern for us. We all favor safe drinking water, but if regulations are imposed that have minimal health impacts, it can prove quite costly!"

To prevent regulations that could be prohibitively expensive for its members, the association actively promotes legislation that is beneficial to its smaller districts. Over the years the ORWA's legislative actions have saved its



"Quality on Tap! Our Commitment, Our Profession" is proudly displayed on a standpipe in rural Oklahoma.

members hundreds of thousands of dollars. Among its many victories is legislation that now requires the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to pay utility relocation costs associated with state and turnpike highway construction. Previously, the systems were forced to pay for these costs. Another success story involving the Farmers Home Administration allowed many water systems to save an average of 35 percent on repayment of outstanding loans.

The ORWA has found other ways to put money back into the pockets of its members. During the mid-1980s insurance costs skyrocketed more than 300 percent, making it virtually impossible for rural water systems to afford. In some instances coverage wasn't even available at any price. This crisis drove the ORWA into action, seeking out alternative sources for reasonably priced insurance.

After much debate and a tremendous amount of effort, the Oklahoma Rural Water Association Assurance Group was formed in 1988. The self-insurance program offers comprehensive liability

protection with rates significantly lower than those charged by most commercial insurance companies. The association has also teamed up with major insurance carriers to offer discounted rates for workers compensation, group health, and even a retirement program.

In addition to tackling financial issues, the association is dedicated to providing information on issues that concern water systems. To keep members up-to-date, the organization uses its website and

publications, the Advocate and the Update. These periodicals address an array of issues including water conservation, management issues, leak detection, smoke detection, water audits, billing, bookkeeping, and emergency response plans. Those plans were put into action a few years ago when the town of New Cordell was hit by a tornado. The association dispatched 25 percent of its staff to the town for several days following the disaster.

It's that kind of dedication that members have come to expect from the ORWA over the past four decades. Furthermore, it's

that kind of commitment that will continue in the decades to come. As the needs of rural water districts continue to change, the ORWA is certain to adapt to meet those requirements. Small towns can rest assured that they have a big supporter in the ORWA.

Another view of ORWA's offices.

