



MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR RURAL AND SMALL UTILITIES

Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative



United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

OPENING REMARKS



Jacqueline Ponti-Lazaruk, *Assistant Administrator, Water and Environmental Programs*

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Rural America is a great place to live, work and enjoy America's natural beauty. Nearly 50 million people live in rural cities, towns and counties, where they produce much of our nation's food, energy, goods and services. Ensuring that local leaders are able to provide sustainable, high quality and affordable water and wastewater service is critical to the health and welfare of rural families, businesses, and ultimately the country. That is why USDA has partnered with EPA to assist rural systems in their efforts to reduce costs, efficiently service their customers' needs, and support quality infrastructure that will be sustainable well into the future. As part of our efforts, USDA and EPA, in collaboration with rural partners, have developed tools to assist rural and small communities in assessing the sustainability of their utilities and creating a plan to address areas that need improvement. Together, we have trained hundreds of circuit riders and other technical assistance providers to conduct workshops for rural and small communities using these tools that were designed by rural partners for rural communities. In the years ahead, we will continue our efforts to create stronger communities and improve the impact of the tools developed under this partnership.



Andrew Sawyers, *Director, Office of Wastewater Management*

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

America's rural and small water systems are the lifeblood of our rural environment and economy. That's why EPA is so pleased to be partnering with the Rural Utilities Service at USDA to help these systems sustainably manage their operations. Working with many other partners, we have developed tools that are helping small and rural systems every day and ensuring that small and rural communities continue to be safe and healthy places to live and work. We are committed to help these systems establish a strong and lasting foundation for assessing and improving their operations as well as ensuring they have the financial resources to get the job done. This report documents the progress we are making and look forward to making in the future.



Peter Grevatt, *Director, Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water*

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Reliable and sustainable water and wastewater services are key to ensuring the quality of life, financial viability and protection of public health in rural America. EPA has partnered with USDA to assist in the implementation of innovative tools to help small and rural utilities provide safe and reliable water and wastewater services for years to come. EPA and USDA will also focus on coordinating trainings and workshops to increase the technical, managerial and financial capacity of rural water and wastewater systems nationwide. We are committed to providing new tools to help rural and small water and wastewater utilities to maintain healthy and economically sustainable communities in rural America.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Trainer and Utility Resources	2
Workshops Across the Nation	3
Real Utility Results	4
Workshop Pioneers	5
Looking Ahead	7

Supporting rural and small drinking water and wastewater systems in their commitment to provide successful and resilient service



Additional resources available online:

<http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/sustain/watereum.cfm>

<http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/services/sustainable-management-tools>

For more information on this initiative, please contact:

Jim Horne, EPA – Horne.James@epa.gov (202-564-0571)

LaVonda Pernell, USDA – LaVonda.Pernell@wdc.usda.gov (202-720-9635)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the Initiative?

The Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative is part of an overall Memorandum of Agreement signed between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2011 to support activities helping rural and small water and wastewater systems more effectively provide sustainable services to the communities they support.

Tools for Rural and Small Systems

EPA and USDA are working with rural partners to promote the sustainability of rural and small utilities on an ongoing basis. This has resulted in two key tools for utilities and the technical assistance (TA) providers that serve them: *The Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management* and *Workshop in a Box: Sustainable Management of Rural and Small Systems Workshops*. The tools and supporting resources provide a structured and user-friendly approach for utilities to assess current performance and future goals in relation to key management areas for sustainable utility management. The assessment results equip users to create plans for improving sustainability over time, making them more resilient, saving them money, and helping them gain support from customers and decision makers.

What has come out of the Initiative?

Since the launch of the Initiative in 2011, USDA and EPA, working with partners like the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) and the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP), have held four “Train the Trainer” sessions to train field staff and TA providers to conduct workshops and assist utilities in implementing the materials. These sessions have reached more than 1,600 trainers and TA providers, providing critical support to partners around the country to conduct their own workshops in 50 states, reaching more than 1,000 utilities using the *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box*.

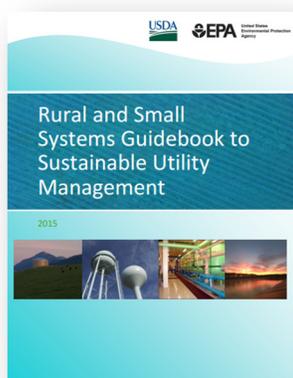
Ten Key Management Areas

- > Product Quality
- > Customer Satisfaction
- > Employee and Leadership Development
- > Operational Optimization
- > Financial Viability
- > Infrastructure Stability
- > Operational Resiliency
- > Community Sustainability and Economic Development
- > Water Resource Adequacy
- > Stakeholder Understanding and Support



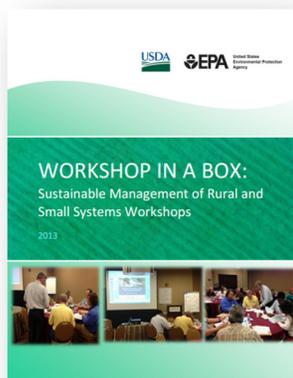
TRAINER AND UTILITY RESOURCES

Under the Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative, EPA and USDA have worked collaboratively with water sector associations and utilities across the country to develop resources to be used by utility operators and managers, trainers and TA providers. The materials are simple to use but still provide in-depth practices and strategies to help water and wastewater utilities to become more sustainable over time.



The Guidebook

The *Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management* is the primary component of this initiative. The *Guidebook* describes the key management areas for sustainable utility management in detail, and provides rural and small systems with a series of steps to assess their operations based on those management areas. The *Guidebook* also provides a compilation of resources specific to small systems that relate to each key management area.



Workshop in a Box

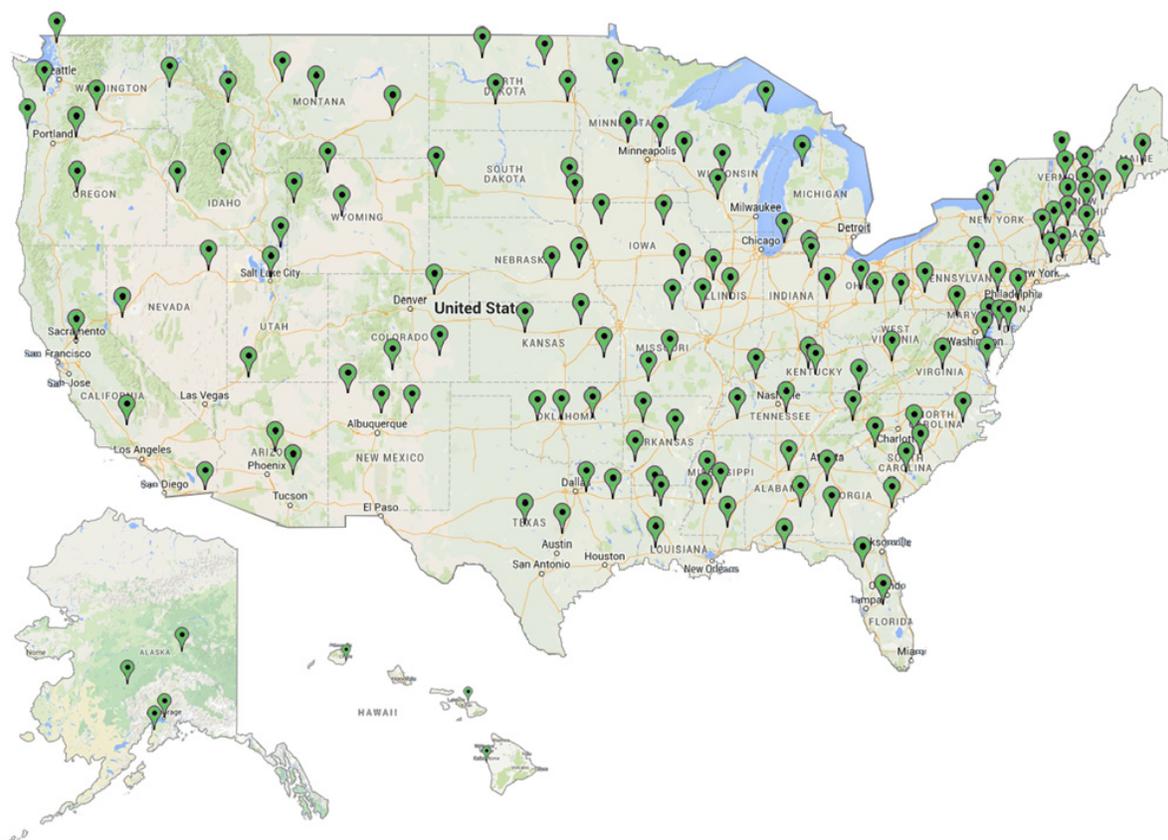
Workshop in a Box contains a suite of materials and instructions to help both rural and small systems and TA providers market and conduct workshops based on the *Guidebook* model. *Workshop in a Box* contains everything that utilities and TA providers need to conduct the workshops, from planning checklists and agenda templates to tips for facilitation techniques.

Supplemental Materials

A series of supplemental materials were developed to accompany the *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box* documents. The supplemental materials include sample workshop presentations, worksheets, promotional materials and resource guides. Together with the *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box*, the supplemental materials provide utilities and TA providers everything they need to implement the Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative.



WORKSHOPS ACROSS THE NATION



To date, workshops have been held in more than 140 locations across the United States.

Building Training Teams

In 2014 and 2015, USDA and EPA co-sponsored four “Train the Trainer” sessions for field staff, TA providers and other training professionals in the water and wastewater sectors. These sessions introduced attendees to the *Guidebook*, *Workshop in a Box* and all accompanying resources. They also provided an in-depth look at the workshop approach, equipping attendees to conduct their own workshops in the field. Over the course of two online webinars and two in-person training sessions for NRWA and RCAP staff, over 1,600 trainers were trained in the implementation of the *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box* materials.



REAL UTILITY RESULTS

Prioritizing Work and Extending Infrastructure Life

OREGON

The City of Yoncalla is in the process of upgrading its sewer system. In August 2014, the wastewater department attended a workshop and used the self-assessment exercise to prioritize its needs. Since then, Yoncalla has begun to evaluate its wastewater collection system, in particular the replacement of older lines. The workshop helped Yoncalla to concentrate on areas of the system in need of immediate work and develop a plan for future upgrades in other areas. Next steps in Yoncalla include the installation of a new lift station to help with infiltration and reduce stormwater in the system, which will greatly increase their lagoon's lifespan.

Funding the Future

VIRGINIA

After a Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management workshop in October 2014, USDA Rural Development (RD) staff who attended the workshop referred Virginia Rural Water Association (VRWA) staff to assist the leaders in the Town of Port Royal. Port Royal sought assistance in exploring infrastructure replacement options to make its water system more sustainable. After meeting with town management, RD and VRWA staff reviewed funding options. Since the council meeting, Port Royal leaders decided to apply for a \$30,000 USDA RD planning grant. VRWA staff used *Workshop in a Box* and its accompanying resources with Port Royal in various follow-up visits to discuss staffing plans, management and operation plans, water loss, monthly water rates, and the need for a vulnerability and emergency response plan.

Communicating More Effectively

LOUISIANA

Concordia Parish Sewer District #1 (CPSD #1) provides service to approximately 900 residential and light commercial connections. In September 2014, CPSD #1 used *Workshop in a Box* to evaluate its system management, financial stability and operational/technical capabilities. Following the workshop, a trainer met one-on-one with the utility's manager to discuss topics reviewed at the workshop and the process of implementing new procedures, resulting in updates to board members and immediate improvements to communications and employee health and safety procedures. CPSD #1 is also utilizing the *Workshop in a Box* and *Guidebook* tools as it considers future upgrade projects.



WORKSHOP PIONEERS

Trainers Going Above and Beyond

MASSACHUSETTS

Following workshops in Massachusetts, trainers from the Massachusetts Rural Water Association have followed up with participating utilities, meeting with their board members, presenting at board finance meetings, and conducting special workshop sessions with individual utilities. By connecting directly with utility leaders, trainers have helped to highlight the benefits of implementing the concepts presented in the *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box*, supporting implementation at the local level.

Workshop Participant Feedback

"This workshop was a great introduction for our new board members, but still comprehensive enough for seasoned pros."

"I've rarely attended workshops where participants are so engaged. Hearing other neighboring systems talk about their problems and solutions was almost like attending a therapy session."

"In all of my years of attending and conducting training courses, I have never experienced anything as comprehensive and effective as what I experienced today. Thank you!"

Charting New Ground

EPA and USDA sponsored four workshops to pilot the Key Management Areas and test the Workshop in a Box approach. Pilot workshops were conducted in a live classroom setting with utility participants in California, Georgia, Michigan and Tennessee to discuss the real-life challenges that they face on a daily basis and to ensure that the workshops can support utilities in identifying priority areas of focus. Workshop in a Box incorporates the experiences and feedback from participants in these pilots, in addition to input from other utility managers and technical assistance providers across the country.



Participants in the Tennessee pilot workshop work through the Self-Assessment exercise.



A participant in a South Carolina workshop presents the results of his group's Self-Assessment exercise discussion.

Reaching New Audiences

SOUTH DAKOTA

Although the Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative was designed with water and wastewater utilities in mind, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation brought members of its housing and solid waste organizations to a workshop held in South Dakota. The various entities were able to collaborate and discuss the “big picture” of sustainability in their community.

Trainers Helping Trainers

TEXAS, FLORIDA AND SOUTH CAROLINA

Around the country, trainers are sharing their experiences, learning from each other, and exchanging tips and best practices. In 2014, trainers from various states attended workshops in other regions to observe and learn from their counterparts. Most recently, leaders from Florida attended a workshop in Terrell, Texas, and in turn, invited trainers from South Carolina to attend their workshop in Haines City, Florida, to share what they had learned.

Saving Utilities Money

MINNESOTA

In 2014, Minnesota Rural Water Association (MRWA) staff met with City Council, Water Commission, and Economic Development members from the City of International Falls to review *Workshop in a Box*. The city had previously planned to hire a consulting firm to review the water department’s plans to help set future priorities. The cost of the firm’s support would have been close to \$25,000 for the city. After participating in a workshop, International Falls asked MRWA to help them use the *Workshop in a Box* and 10 key management areas to create a plan for the water department, saving the city thousands of dollars in consulting fees.

“The Self Assessment Worksheet is a great tool in helping us show systems how to better manage their time and operations, helping to reduce equipment breakdowns and lower operating expenses.”

Southeast RCAP



LOOKING AHEAD

Enhancing Along the Way

USDA and EPA see the Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative as a great start to improving the sustainability of rural and small systems, and will continually incorporate user feedback to improve the workshop approach and supporting materials, keeping current with industry best practices.

In early 2015, EPA and USDA hosted a series of webinars to gather feedback from trainers and TA providers in more than 40 states on their experiences using the *Workshop in a Box* and supporting materials, as well as gathering insights



Participants in a Kansas workshop display their certificates of completion.

about how the resources can evolve with the needs of the industry. USDA and EPA will continue to seek feedback of this type to advance the program and create new resources.

What's Next?

Operating under a “continual improvement” approach, EPA and USDA will seek ways to work closely with trainers, TA providers, and system managers in three key areas:

1. Helping systems communicate more effectively with local decision makers about the importance of supporting actions that result from the workshops;
2. Helping providers spend additional time with systems following the workshops to provide the kind of hands-on assistance that can lead to real improvements, including gaining access to financing for these improvements; and
3. Working with trainers, TA providers and others to help systems identify the most cost-effective options for financing infrastructure.

The *Guidebook* and *Workshop in a Box* will continue to serve as a dynamic, evolving framework for how rural and small water and wastewater systems can provide sustainable services to enhance the communities that they support, and meet the needs of an ever-changing industry.

Words from our Partners

The Sustainable Rural Utility Management Initiative is an important, easy-to-use tool for small utilities as they seek to optimize the sustainability of their systems by identifying and prioritizing activities and programs that improve their management capacity. It helps them to engage their staff and board in crucial discussions that lead to behavioral and programmatic changes in management. By using the Guidebook, Workshop in a Box and supporting materials, small and rural systems can devote their limited resources to those areas of management that lead to improved compliance, ensure sustainable operations and provide the opportunity to reduce costs and keep customers' rates at reasonable levels.

Robert Stewart, Executive Director
Rural Community Assistance Partnership

Small and rural systems from around the country have embraced the Sustainable Rural and Small Utility Management Initiative as an effective way to make tangible improvements to their operations. We have found that managers, operations specialists and decision makers who attend the workshops come away with a renewed focus and a specific plan of action to achieve goals. Feedback from participants has been very positive, with increasing buy-in from governing boards and councils. Follow-up assistance is the next critical step to creating lasting improvements for these communities and achieving true sustainability for future generations.

Matt Holmes, Deputy CEO
National Rural Water Association



MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR RURAL AND
SMALL UTILITIES
Sustainable Utility Management Initiative

