



Senate Natural Resources Committee

COVID-19 Updates

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Testimony by Tom DiPietro, Green Mountain Water Environment Association, Past President

Organizational Background

- [GMWEA](#) is a non-profit organization that promotes public awareness of Vermont's drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems and supports the professional community that provides water quality management services to Vermonters. Our 450 members are primarily facility operators, engineers, scientists, and public works staff from throughout Vermont. Collectively we provide a resource of expertise on the practical aspects of water quality management, infrastructure issues, and policy implementation.

COVID-19 Impacts on Utility Operations

- Utility staff
 - Wastewater and drinking water facilities have had to make changes to ensure the safety of staff. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - Minimizing ways that staff comes into contact with each other and equipment. Many facilities have split or staggered shifts. Others have created separate crews that do not interact with each other.
 - Facility modifications to protect against COVID-19 transmission. Plexiglass barriers, etc.
 - Some have used the Local Government Expense Reimbursement ([LGER](#)) grant program to pay for this.
 - Employees that are able to work from home are doing so.
 - Many municipalities furloughed employees for part of 2021. Among the furloughed staff were those individuals that conduct on-going maintenance and cleaning work, or manage infrastructure projects.
 - The average age of a utility operator in VT is 56. GMWEA is working on ways to attract young people to the profession, and we'd be interested to talk with legislators about any programs that they can devise.
- A COVID-19 outbreak at any facilities would have significant impact on facility operation and permit compliance. Many facilities don't have enough staff to cover work if employees are out sick for extended periods. It is always important to note that many community drinking water systems are operated by a single person, and that this person may also have responsibilities related to wastewater.
 - The VT WARN system is in place. This system provides a location where facilities can request help from other municipalities / utilities (staff, equipment, etc) in the case of an emergency. To date, I'm not aware that it has been utilized for COVID-19 related reasons.
- Infrastructure repair / maintenance/ upgrade
 - Our drinking water and wastewater systems are old and require continuous maintenance to ensure proper operation. For a variety of COVID-19 related reasons (e.g. reduced funding,



staff availability, etc) this work has been deferred. This will serve to exacerbate the “aging infrastructure” and “increasing cost of maintenance” problem that we often discuss.

- Consider some type of infrastructure grant program that utilities could use to “catch up” or at least not fall further behind in addressing infrastructure needs. A program of this type would also serve to create jobs and protect the environment.
- Obtaining the materials necessary for utility operation
 - When the pandemic started, we were concerned that certain materials necessary for utility operation would become unavailable. There was some scarcity at first, but generally speaking obtaining the equipment, pumps, chemicals, PPE, and other materials necessary to operate water systems are available. There has been an increase in delivery time, which managers need to take into consideration.
- Utility Fee Delinquencies
 - Drinking water and wastewater utilities are seeing delinquency rates increase from the upper single digits (6-8%) to near 20%. There are differences in these rates by community/system. Generally speaking, you are more likely to see increased delinquency rates in areas with a higher concentration of commercial development, and in areas of lower income.
 - VCAAP program provided some relief to utility rate payers, but [funding ran out](#). There is still a need. Would recommend providing more funding to continue this program. Consider a program that would make direct payments to utilities that can show significant revenue reductions.
 - Drinking water and wastewater utilities are experiencing loss of income from commercial customers with the closure of hotels, restaurants, institutions, etc.
 - As a result of reduced or delayed revenue, many utilities are planning to utilize cash reserves, reduce staff hours, or defer planned maintenance, system upgrades, and other work.
 - In South Burlington, the stormwater utility fee delinquency rate only increased from 1% to 2%. In Burlington, they’ve seen a 3% delinquency rate on the stormwater portion of their bills.
- Essential worker status
 - Even though drinking water and wastewater utility operators serve a vital role in protecting human health and the environment they are not considered “essential workers” in Vermont. EPA has made this [recommendation](#). This deserves some further consideration in Vermont. If utility staff were unable to do their jobs the consequences could be disastrous to human health and the environment. Clearly, front line health workers and emergency services personnel deserve to be recognized for their role and efforts. However, some consideration must be given to those that provide safe drinking water and manage the millions of gallons of wastewater generated by Vermonters. Consider the consequences when you turn on your tap and no water comes out, wastewater fails to leave your home when you flush the toilet, or a clogged pipe or pump failure results in a wastewater discharge to the environment.
- New Water quality legislation
 - It is now more important than ever that any new legislation aimed at the wastewater and drinking water sector (e.g. increased testing for PFAS, studies, etc) be accompanied by a funding source. Now is not the time to further burden these systems with new and expensive requirements. We need to recognize the critical role that these facilities play in protecting human health and the environment and not pile up the adversity such that we foment collapse or failure.