



Winter 2018

RURAL MATTERS

The Magazine of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership



The *Regionalization* Issue

Rural Matters® (ISSN 1097-7619) is a publication of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.
1701 K Street NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
Tel: (202) 408-1273
www.rcap.org

Subscription/editorial/advertising inquiries: ruralmatters@rcap.org

PUBLISHER

Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.
Nathan Ohle, Executive Director

EDITOR

Spenser Wempe

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kinsey Brown

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Joy Barrett
Kinsey Brown
Mark Johnson
Brenda Koeing
James Meece
Nathan Ohle
Spenser Wempe
Elizabeth Zach

DESIGN

Spenser Wempe, Designer

YGS Group, Printer

Publication of Rural Matters® is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Opinions and ideas expressed in Rural Matters® are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc., its affiliates, officers, or funders.

© 2018 Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc. All rights reserved. Rural Matters® and the Rural Matters logo are trademarks of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc.

RCAP BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Kieth Ashby (President)

Mike Brownfield (Vice President)
Midwest Assistance Program (MAP)

Hope Culpit (Treasurer/Secretary)
Southeast Rural Community Assistance Program (SERCAP)

LaMonte Guillory
LOR Foundation

Billy Hix
Cherokee Nation (Oklahoma)

Ruthann House
Great Lakes RCAP (GLRCAP)

Anish Jantrania
Texas A&M University

Stan Keasling
Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC)

Karen Koller
RCAP Solutions

Rick Martinez
The Apricot Tree Consulting

Ines Polonius
Communities Unlimited (CU)

Jessi Snyder
Self-Help Enterprises (SHE)

Jay Williams
The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

RCAP NATIONAL STAFF

Nathan Ohle
Executive Director

Joy Barrett
Director of Training & Technical Services

John Felleman
Director of Technology

Alia Iqbal
Director of Finance

Ted Stiger
Director of Government Relations & Policy

Spenser Wempe
Director of Communications

Ashley Zuelke
Director of Research & Programs

Jeff Oxenford
Technical Assistance Specialist

Kevin Kundert
Technical Assistance Specialist

Kinsey Brown
Communications & Office Assistant

RCAP is an EEO provider and employer.

Features

08 Better Together: Unifying
Water Systems
James Meece

11 Solving the Rural Water
Crisis
Brenda Koenig

22 The Story of San Migel
Elizabeth Zach

25 The Joy of Retirement
Joy Barrett



SAVE THE DATE

2019 RCAP
NATIONAL TRAINING
CONFERENCE

JULY 29-AUGUST 1, 2019

THE VINOY RENAISSANCE
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

Learn more at rcap.org/events



At the heart of RCAP's work is the premise that it starts at the community level. No matter what type of project or where we are across the country, RCAP believes that taking a locally-led approach is vital to success. Our work is focused on building capacity at the local level and helping communities fulfill their vision for the future.

That focus is incredibly important

From the Ground Up

Nathan Ohle, RCAP Executive Director

for all of the work that we do, but especially when we are talking about regionalization opportunities for water or wastewater systems. For us, regionalization can mean many things, and can be as simple as sharing the cost of a water operator or an accounting system between several communities. Regionalization may not be the strategy every community decided to pursue, but where it is the best strategy, we assist communities in understanding both the opportunities for creating a stronger, more sustainable system that benefits the region.

Small systems serving fewer than 10,000 people make up 97% of the United States' public water systems. That means approximately 151,000 water systems are likely experiencing challenges related to socioeconomic and environmental challenges, making necessary plans for long-term sustainability of vital community

assets. This is why regionalization is such an important topic for small water and wastewater systems across the country. RCAP continues to play a large role in assisting those communities and helping policymakers understand the implications of these challenges.

While offering technical assistance and training for small systems, RCAP technical assistance providers (TAPs) have been at the forefront of assisting communities dealing with these challenges. In several states across the country, small systems may find themselves in the position of choosing between maintaining services or violating regulations. These complex decisions are hyper-local and are affected differently by local circumstances. Small communities everywhere face challenges because of scale – a town of five-hundred or five-thousand may have similar infrastructure and needs, but it will cost the smaller town much



more per ratepayer to maintain and make upgrades to the system. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) has estimated that through 2035, the smallest water systems across the country (serving 3,300 or less), will require more than \$74.4 billion in drinking water infrastructure capital improvements to serve an estimated 23.4 million people. Regionalization can provide opportunities to decrease cost to deliver services, while also allowing for innovative financing that lowers the cost for infrastructure improvements overall.

Partnerships to ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitary wastewater disposal for a community is personal and relationship driven. Water systems partnering on their own is an exception; most need a partner that can be an objective third party to mediate and facilitate conversations and help to build relationships. This takes time. RCAP's TAPs are leaders in the facilitation of

regionalization for small community water and wastewater systems across the country because we understand that you must spend the time to build trust and help communities understand the variety of options available to them, in structure, governance, and nuance. Our approach is that there is a spectrum of regionalization opportunities that span from communities sharing resources, like the cost of a contract engineer all the way to the physical connection of infrastructure. RCAP's proven ability to assist small rural communities in regionalization opportunities sets it apart from other organizations focused on this work.

To expand on this work, RCAP has recently partnered with Spring Point Partners to further the work on small community regionalization, providing both broader understanding for communities and policymakers on regionalization opportunities, and further expanding our on-site

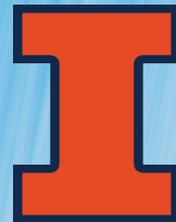
technical assistance in communities. The research will also draw on the incredible experience that exists within RCAP to present case studies and implementation strategies that have been successful around the country. Because this is such a vital piece of the larger puzzle for water solutions across the country, RCAP is excited to be a leader in assisting small communities across the country in these important discussions, ensuring that water and wastewater systems continue to be the backbone for rural communities across the country.





WaterOperator.org

WaterOperator.org aggregates the best resources on the web for small system operators in a free, user-friendly location. With 11,000+ training events added annually and 17,000+ free resources indexed in the database, our staff maintains updated information from more than 800 state and national organizations. The program is a collaboration between the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, with funding from the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency.



Learn more at wateroperator.org and follow us on twitter @help4smallwater

RURALRISE.ORG

NUMBER OF
PEOPLE WHO
ATTEND THE 2018
RURAL RISE
SUMMIT IN WEST
VIRGINIA.

175

7

WORKING GROUPS
TO BUILD
INITIATIVES &
PROGRAMS TO
HELP SUPPORT
RURAL
COMMUNITIES .

BRINGING TOGETHER ECOSYSTEM BUILDERS

RuralRISE is a community of organizations that aims to increase opportunities and prosperity for small and rural communities across the United States. Recognizing that innovation and entrepreneurship are blind to location, RuralRISE seeks to increase the opportunities, increase accessibility, spotlight innovation, entrepreneurial and start-up activities that work in a rural context. For more information about RuralRISE, visit ruralrise.org

Rural
RISE



James Meece

Better Together

Unifying
Water
Systems

The unification of water systems and the sharing of their resources, or regionalization, is a technique becoming increasingly more popular for rural communities across the United States. The practice not only increases the capacity of systems that may be struggling, but it also allows for communities to share precious, but necessary, resources. The Kankakee River Water Planning Area Alliance (KRWPA) in Northeastern Illinois held their first meeting on Thursday, June 21, 2018. The purpose of the meeting was for the organization to elect a board, vote on bylaws, and discuss the future of the unified organization.

The KRWPA is an organization made up of communities based in the Northeastern part of Illinois whose water supply is not reliant on



Lake Michigan. They have decided they need to come together to protect the water resources in the area. The KRWPAAs hope to accomplish this goal by developing policies that support education and public outreach on topics related to water supply planning, establishing consistent standards and reporting, developing best practices, ordinances, and plans that support the Northeastern Illinois Regional Water Supply, approving an annual budget, and establishing an operating fund for KRWPAAs.

The first meeting took place at the Center in Custer Park and was attended by representatives from the Godley Public Water District, the Village of Diamond, the Village of Braidwood, the City of Coal City, representatives from the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP), and various interested members of the public.

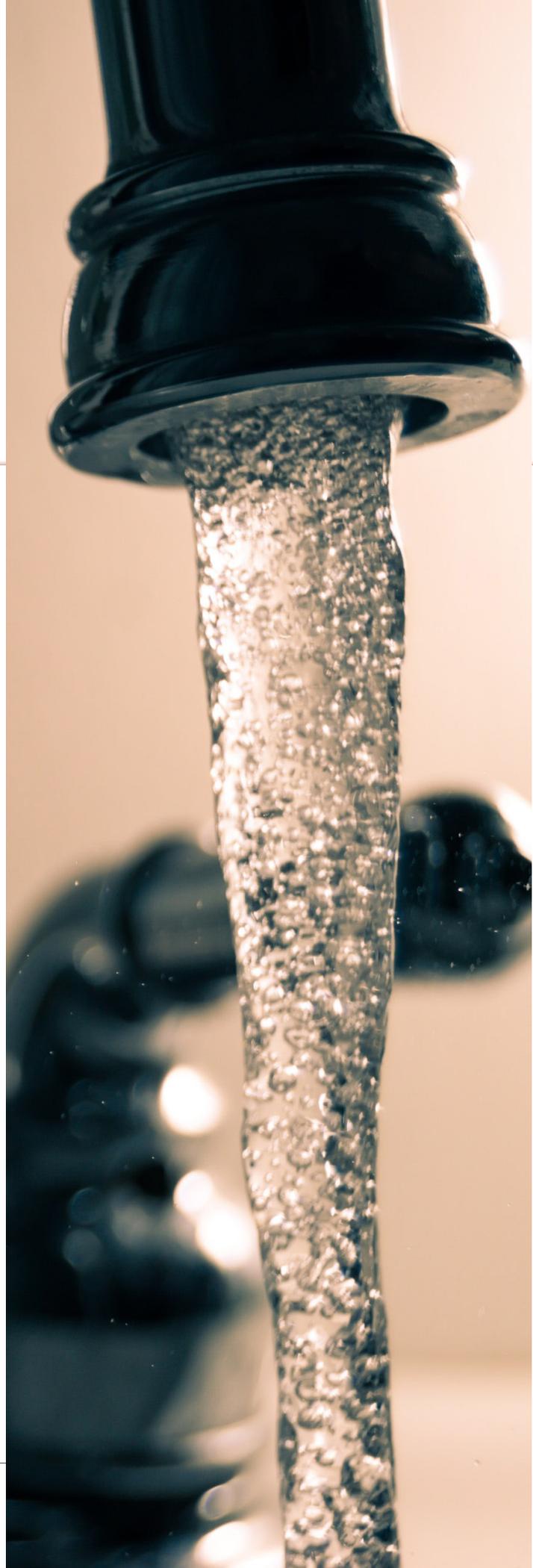
“These types of organizations are really important to the future of water planning in this county. Shared services are something that are becoming more and more common, and it is really

impressive that all of these communities have come together today,” said Bud Mason of the Great Lake’s region of RCAP (GLRCAP).

Mason began the meeting by engaging all the parties with introductions and identifying who they were representing. John Rauch, a program director for GLRCAP, then began facilitating the meeting. The priority of the group was passing bylaws that would form the foundation for the organization.

The alliance also was tasked with electing officers for their Board of Directors. Partners from across different organizations were nominated and elected with unanimous votes to represent the unified group.

“I commend everyone who was involved in this meeting today. We are seeing a shift of resources in this county, and it is important for organizations like this to form and to begin planning for the future of the region. The things that were done at this meeting today will have an impact on future generations to come,” praised Rauch.



Solving the Rural Water Crisis



Brenda Koenig

Every fall, Americans from all walks of life and locations drive through the countryside to enjoy the changing foliage, apple orchards and park-lands, often barely glancing at the small water or wastewater utilities along the roadsides that serve area residents. Yet if they took the effort to speak to the people who are struggling, often at great odds, to provide clean water in these rural areas, they might begin to understand. Even in this country, with all its resources and technological advances, there are many places — just around the bend — where clean water is not accessible. In fact, according to a recent article in *The New Republic*, of the five thousand drinking water systems that racked up health-based violations in 2015, more than fifty percent were systems that serve five hundred people or fewer.

The challenges of these small rural systems are many: aging infrastructure (add to this a lack of overflow capacity for wastewater systems), water quality issues, comparatively lower water operator wages, increasing man-made and natural disaster

hazards such as extreme rain events, stricter health standards, a small pool of paying customers, and, always, a lack of funding. The new infrastructure bill, *The American Water Infrastructure Act*, just recently signed by the president is providing some hope for the future, but for now, many communities live in a constant state of worry about their water.

On top of this, many rural communities are dealing



with the political and economic pressure to sell their utilities to private companies, if they haven't already done so, a particularly tempting option in times of crisis. According to a recent special series on the rural water crisis from National Public Radio (NPR), this "complicated mix of public and private ownership often confounds efforts to mandate improvements or levy penalties, even if customers complain of poor water quality or mismanagement."

But there is hope on the horizon. Certainly increased funding for infrastructure is part of the solution, but according to California water commissioner Maria Herrera in a recent article written by the Public Policy Institute of California, more can be done. She suggests that legislation should also increase technical assistance funding and give communities an opportunity to hire consultants to develop shovel-ready projects and fund safe drinking water projects. Also on her wish list: "We need to not only fund mitigation of contaminated

wells and treatment plants, but also help communities develop redundant water sources, promote consolidation of small systems to larger ones, and help them with drought contingency planning. Communities need guidance and technical assistance in order to develop solutions and participate in water planning."

In Louisiana, circuit rider Timmy Lemoine says in *The Advocate* that he is, "seeing a shift as small systems allow larger systems with a certified operator take over management." And at the University of Iowa, engineers are testing new wastewater treatment technologies, hoping to defray costs for aging small-town systems. In addition, organizations such as the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) have a wealth of resources to support rural utilities and help them save money, such as energy efficiency videos and guides. The fact remains that solutions such as these will need to continue to ensure that rural residents can count on clean water now and into the future.



Views From a Vermont Village

Mark Johnson

It's late in the evening, and the monthly meeting of the Prudential Committee ended hours ago. Lisa Bowden, treasurer and clerk of the Barnet Fire District Number 2, is tired and frustrated. She should have been home hours ago, but an issue with the chlorine pump at the well pumphouse is keeping her awake. Lisa is used to sending out bills, balancing the District's too-thin checkbook, and chasing customers down for delinquent payments; replacing the diaphragm on a chemical feed pump is not in her proverbial toolkit. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a new pump diaphragm in her actual toolkit, either.

RCAP Solutions, RCAP's Northeast region, had attended the meeting out of concern that two of the three Prudential Committee members of Barnet Fire District Number 2 (BFD2), a special district that manages the water system, sidewalks, and the few streetlights in the tiny Vermont village, had thoughts of stepping down. Having worked with the community years before, RCAP Solutions stayed in touch with the system and knew that it was a critical time for the village. Volunteering to attend meetings, making difficult financial decisions, and minding the day-to-day operation of the water system seemed to be getting old for members of the Prudential Committee. It was not the only thing getting old, as Lisa pointed out. "I'd hate to look at the average age in this village," she said during a recent meeting, "We're not getting any younger."

In a village of a few hundred people – the system has just sixty-one connections – finding the right people to

lead the Fire District and figuring out how to fund critical infrastructure improvements wasn't necessarily the issue. The issue was finding anyone at all. Fortunately for the village, they may have finally found the right people. For months, Lisa had pleaded for residents to attend meetings and to get involved with the water system in her regular emails to customers. And there were plenty of emails, because Lisa religiously kept customers up-to-date on the latest in a long string of water main breaks, boil water advisories, and water usage restrictions.

Then, a resident who lives a few doors down from the pumphouse, Jon Carpenter, decided he'd be willing to step into the role of Chairperson for the Prudential Committee. David Stevenson, a holdover from the previous Committee, agreed to be trained to help monitor the system and record chlorine residuals under the tutelage of the system's certified water operator. Jay Sprout, a resident and pastor at a local church, decided he'd be willing to add his voice to the three-person governing body.

Despite recent source water and treatment plant improvements made by BFD2, maintaining regulatory compliance is a real challenge - as it is for many rural communities. The water system, which serves about two-hundred customers, had been under a boil-water advisory since 2004 due to long-term source water deficiencies. In 2014, members of the community expressed a desire to acquire the system from its private owner, and RCAP Solutions facilitated several steps in the process. The goal

of the purchase was to give the community more control over the fate of its water system. As a publicly owned water system, BFD2 would now be able to access federal funding sources for long overdue improvements.

In February of 2017, BFD2 completed a major source water improvement project, financed in part by the Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund. This marked an important milestone for the community, as they were able to lift the boil water advisory following the improvements and installation of a new disinfection process. It was not the end of infrastructure concerns, however; frequent distribution system failures were crippling the system's operating budget. Well pumps work overtime, the chlorine supply dwindles, and another tab is opened with the local contractor to start digging. Replacing a few feet of pipe at a time is unsustainable, and the Prudential Committee knows it. The contractor knows it. Maybe most importantly, the customers are beginning to realize that a long-term solution is needed.

To address the issues in the distribution system, RCAP Solutions helped the board frame an action plan. In the process, BFD2 could prioritize distribution system improvements - including the replacement of a critical, aging water main crossing a river in the village. Meanwhile, the Prudential Committee is taking advantage of grant-funded leak detection services and is working with RCAP Solutions to increase revenue. In addition to securing a rate adjustment and looking at available planning grants, though, they will



need to work on another critical task - gaining the support and trust of the community. For a system this size, taking on more debt - which requires community support in the form of a bond vote - will be a likely scenario considering the lack of reserves and mounting infrastructure concerns. For BFD2, it is the financially prudent approach; annual repairs are comparable to, and occasionally more than, another bond payment. With interest rates on the rise, a project that is "necessary and inevitable," in the words of a local USDA representative, can't be started soon enough.

For the Prudential Committee, it is more important than ever that they build on the achievements of the source water improvement project. Unfortunately, operational issues with the new chlorination system, coupled with the lack of local capacity for diagnosing and resolving those issues, contributed to a violation in late 2017 for failing to maintain adequate microbial treatment. Under the Groundwater Rule, the system is required to maintain a minimum chlorine residual to ensure adequate disinfection. Avoiding an additional violation would be critical; every violation or misstep for the Prudential Committee - especially one that results in another boil-water advisory - reduces the likelihood that they will be able to gain the community's trust. Without the trust of the customers, it's unlikely that they will move ahead with the bond vote necessary for future improvements.

Scanning the shelves of the Fire District's pumphouse, Lisa and RCAP Solutions Technical Assistance Provider, Mark Johnson, finally found a rebuild kit that would work for a backup pump. The chlorine residual was re-established, a violation avoided, and Lisa had received her first lesson on rebuilding a chemical

metering pump. In the weeks that followed, RCAP Solutions provided practical guidance to the system's operator and treatment plant engineer on how to improve the chemical feed system. RCAP Solutions has also provided the system's board members with the knowledge they need to maintain compliance with state and federal regulations.

A former dairy farmer, Jon Carpenter has brought his dedication and work ethic to help solve some of the Fire District's most pressing issues. David Stevenson's watchful eyes have kept the Prudential Committee from having to request a site visit from the certified water operator every time a minor issue pops up, which is helpful. Even though the operator keeps close tabs on the system, she lives over an hour away and BFD2 can't afford too many emergency visits. Jay Sprout's common-sense approach to system management has already started to pay dividends; meetings are run efficiently, and discussion stays on topic.

Lisa Bowden, on the other hand, continues to claim that she's ready for a break from her duties. Whether it's trudging up to the storage tank in a snowstorm, communicating critical details about the system to customers, performing her duties as tax collector, or trying to act interested in the intricacies of pump diaphragms, for years Lisa has been a passionate advocate for the village. But Lisa can't do it much longer. Nor does she want to, as she tells anyone who will listen. "I'm too old for this stuff," she pointed out as she locked up the pumphouse, ready for a vacation that is long overdue.

U.S. EPA Drinking Water State Revolving Fund

The Drinking Water State Revolving Fund is a federal-state partnership providing financial support to water systems and state drinking water programs. The fund was created through the 1996 Amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) so communities can ensure compliance with drinking water standards. States determine a project's funding based on three criteria: 1) those that address the most serious risk to human health, 2) those that are necessary to ensure compliance with the SDWA, and 3) those that assist systems most in need, according to State-determined affordability criteria. Both public and privately-owned community water systems and nonprofit non-community water systems are eligible for this funding. Systems can apply for four different financial assistance types directly from their state agencies. For more information, please visit: epa.gov/drinkingwatersrf

RURAL COMMUNITIES NEED

WATER SOLUTIONS



LOR
FOUNDATION

From watershed restoration to sustainable water infrastructure, protecting clean water is essential to a town's quality of life. That's why the LOR Foundation finds it important to partner with communities to develop innovative solutions that enhance livability in the Mountain West.

#EXPLORE our work at lorfoundation.org

COLORADO IDAHO MONTANA NEW MEXICO WYOMING



ICY MI

Originally released
in the RCAP
Newsletter
on November
14, 2018. To
subscribe, visit
rcap.org

RCAP Receives Federal Awards to Expand Assistance to Rural Communities Nationwide

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is pleased to announce that it has received multiple grants from across federal and philanthropic programs to continue its work helping rural communities develop and expand technical capacity throughout all fifty states, U.S. territories, and tribal lands.

RCAP received close to \$17 million in total from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Water & Environmental Programs (WEP) Technical Assistance and Training (TAT) Grant Program to fund five programs, including grants for the RCAP Technitrain Program, Tribal Technitrain and Colonias Technitrain programs. These programs provide on-site technical assistance and training to help thousands of rural water and wastewater systems achieve financial sustainability, increase managerial capacity, comply with federal and state regulations, improve environmental and public health, and improve coordination among communities. In addition, through its national Solid Waste Management Program, RCAP will provide technical assistance and training to help communities reduce or eliminate



water resource pollution and to improve the planning and management of solid waste sites.

Additionally, RCAP was selected to complete a comprehensive National Water-Wastewater Infrastructure Application and Development Assistance Project in partnership with USDA. This project will help rural communities increase their ability to successfully apply for USDA Rural Development water/wastewater infrastructure loans and grants by providing training workshops and on-site application and development assistance.

RCAP and its partners are pleased to begin work on the National WealthWorks Technical Assistance Program, funded by the USDA Rural Development Innovation Center's Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) initiative. RCAP received this award to assist in the development and implementation of economic development plans in rural communities throughout the United States.

RCAP has also entered into three technical assistance and training cooperative agreements with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) Office of Ground Water & Drinking Water (OGWDW), awarding more than \$13.5 million over three years to RCAP. The first agreement allows RCAP to help communities achieve compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). The second agreement tasks RCAP to provide trainings and direct assistance to waste water systems, helping them comply with the

Clean Water Act (CWA). The third US EPA agreement will enable RCAP to help private well owners assess the quality of their water and understand key well-management practices.

RCAP also has announced they will be working with Spring Point Partners, a social impact investor that is helping to fund some of RCAP's efforts to help small, rural water and wastewater systems partner for sustainable future operations. RCAP's partnership with Spring Point Partners commits \$1.9 million over three years to provide regionalization on-site technical assistance. RCAP will also produce and offer policymakers and communities research, case studies, and events to increase understanding of the regionalization process, paths to partnership, and options available to small systems.

View RCAP's award video release for additional information. (<https://rcap.org/resource/rcap-receives-federal-awards-to-expand-assistance-to-rural-communities/>)

RCAP is a national non-profit network providing opportunity, assistance, and practical guidance to small communities in all fifty states, U.S. territories, and tribal lands to ensure access to safe drinking water, sanitary wastewater disposal, and economic prosperity for all of rural America. To learn more about RCAP, visit www.rcap.org.

For inquiries about this release, please contact swempe@rcap.org.



RCAP

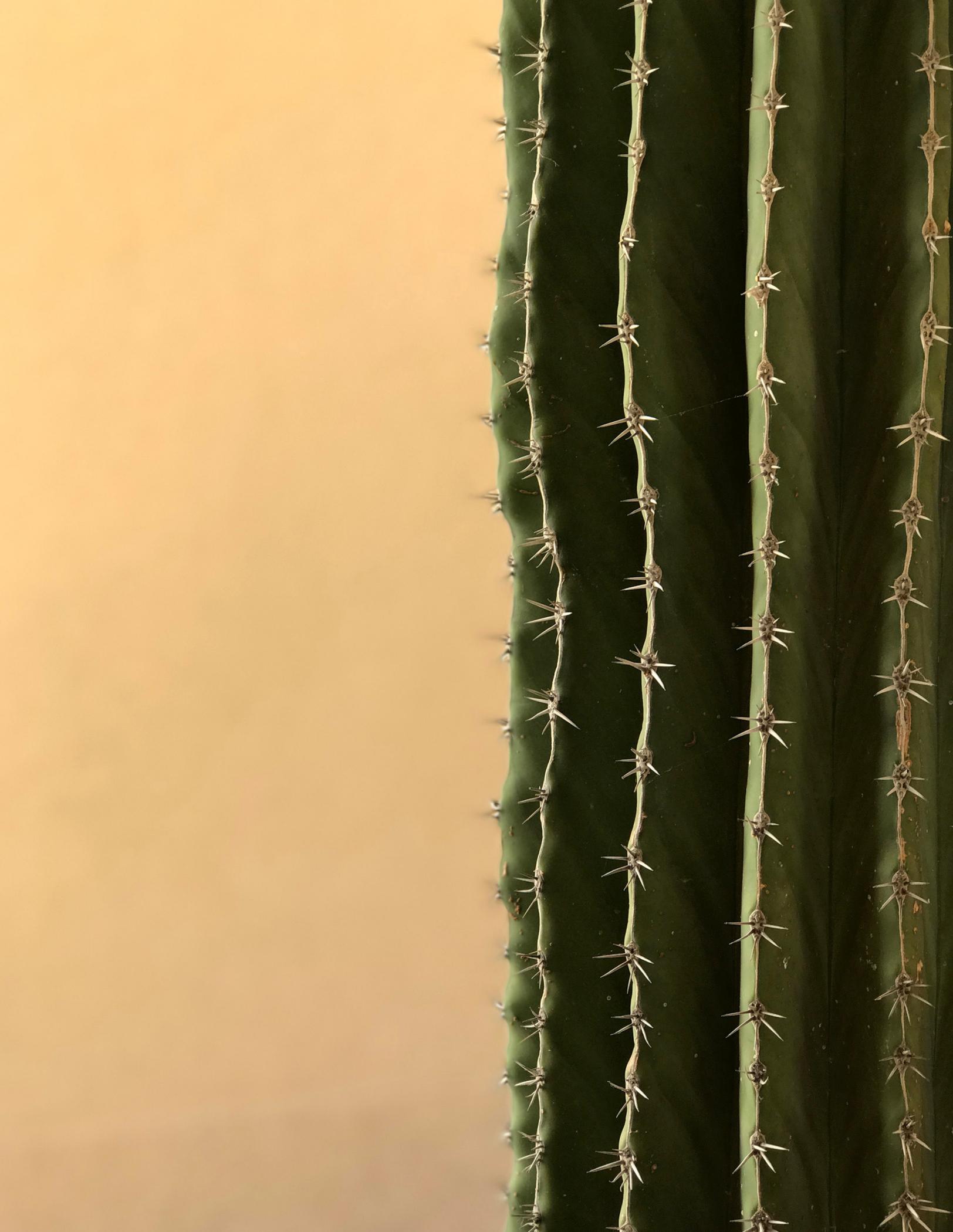
2019 Fly-In

WE LOOK FORWARD TO MEMBERS
OF THE RCAP NETWORK JOINING
US IN WASHINGTON D.C. ON

March 24-28, 2019

AT THE LIAISON ON CAPITOL HILL.
TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS AND
OTHER RCAP EVENTS VISIT
RCAP.ORG/EVENTS

*For any questions,
please email events@rcap.org*



M

odest one-story clay homes line the single road that cut across this community near the U.S. - Mexico border. At first blush, it would seem San Miguel, New Mexico, nestled in the Mesilla Valley, has stood still, or stood the test of time.

Established in the early 1900s, San Miguel resembles other rural communities in this border region. There are no sidewalks here and there are few businesses, though there is an arresting and prominent stone chapel. Most, if not all, of the resident's work in the surrounding fields as their ancestors did after the United States signed the

Mexican Farm Labor Agreement with Mexico in August 1942. That agreement, also known as the Bracero Program, guaranteed decent living conditions, including sanitation, adequate food and shelter, and a thirty cent per hour minimum wage. However, the program expired in 1964.

The San Miguel community like many others in the area has limited access to basic services, such as water, sewer, and housing. Moreover, official socioeconomic data on the rural community and others like it has typically been scarce, making it difficult for government agencies to obtain federal funding that could improve infrastructure.

San Miguel is a federally designated "colonia," which is defined as a rural community with a population of twenty-five thousand or fewer residents and is within one-hundred and fifty miles of the U.S. - Mexico border. Like other colonias, the community struggles to supply residents with a reliable and potable water supply and an adequate sewage system. Colonia residents on average earn a Median Household Income (MHI) of about \$26,875 a year compared with the state average of "There is a lack of technical, managerial, and financial capacity to serve the residents here," said Olga Morales, a regional manager for environmental services for RCAP's western region, Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) and



based in Las Cruces, about 11 miles north of San Miguel. She notes that adequate and sustainable water infrastructure are particularly lacking in San Miguel. “When there are so few residents and water connections, you can’t generate enough revenue to support a staff.”

In San Miguel, 393 water connections serve a population of eleven-hundred residents. Most of these connections are residential but also include a school and a few businesses. “And this,” she continued, “is a serious problem especially during times of drought. These communities become very vulnerable to water outages.”

Morales has worked with the Alto de Las Flores Board of Directors since 2011. Alto de Las Flores is a membership-based association that provides drinking water to the community.

The prior year, state funding was set aside to establish the

Colonias Infrastructure Project Act, a state program designed to support colonia community infrastructure development, specifically for water systems, wastewater systems, solid waste disposal facilities, flood and drainage control, as well as road and housing infrastructure.

This enactment was particularly important at the time for San Miguel and how residents there managed their water and wastewater needs. Prior to 2010, Dona Ana County conducted operations and management for Alto de las Flores Mutual Domestic Water Consumers Association (MDWCA). However, in 2011 community residents approached RCAC to request assistance to help them take control again of their water system and, in effect, their community’s future. According to Morales, reclaiming their system was not an easy process as the community lacked the managerial, financial and technical capacity to operate the system. It would take years

to eventually get the community back on its feet. The main challenge was to determine the association's members and to hold an election to elect a five-member board.

"It was important to put the board back in place to reclaim the control of community," Morales said. Since then, work has focused on expanding San Miguel's local technical, managerial, and financial capacity.

On the financial end, Morales and her RCAC colleague Karl Pennock, a rural development specialist, have helped the association improve capacity. "The Association board members have contracted accounting and billing," Morales said, adding that MDWCA has no administrative staff. "This frees them to focus on other matters, namely, to set policy."

The board gradually settled on a two-pronged approach. In the short term, Morales worked with the association's board to help them regionalize by entering into a contract with the Lower Rio Grande Public Water Works Authority, a regional water system next to the community of San Miguel, which would in turn provide the San Miguel community with a water interconnect for emergency purposes and to provide operation and maintenance services.

While developing the short-term solution, Morales also worked with the board to add a large producing well to create and expand its only water source. In terms of infrastructure, the MDWCA members have focused on finishing drilling and developing an existing well and installing a 250,000-gallon water storage tank. Other improvements include upgrading an undersized distribution line, installing water treatment, and replacing water meters and hydrants. These improvements will enable the system to enhance water quality, meet projected demand, increase operating efficiency, and comply with existing fire code standards.

In August 2017, the association was obligated to \$3.367

million in U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funding (including \$1.847 million in grants) to complete the long-term infrastructure improvements to its water system. One of the funding conditions required that the association complete a rate study.

Pennock conducted the water rate study in fall 2017, as Alto De Las Flores board members requested, to meet the USDA loan and grant letter of conditions. The study's recommendations, presented to board members in March 2018, highlighted significant findings, including that the MDWCA was, as Morales said, not generating enough revenue to meet the requirements of the USDA funding offer.

Specifically, MDWCA would need to be able to make a \$61,476 annual loan payment, an annual short-lived sixteen-thousand dollar asset reserve payment, and an annual six-thousand dollar contribution to a debt reserve fund. The study also took inflation into account, along with increases in service connection based on projected population growth.

"I talked with the water operator and the system accountant about the study," Pennock recalled, noting how important it is to have the board's support before potentially raising rates. "I also attended board meetings and presented the draft rate study to the board and members of the community in March 2018."

In short, the study recommended increasing the monthly residential, commercial and base fees so the community could generate positive cash flow to cover all operating and reserve contribution costs to meet the USDA lender requirements.

The board unanimously adopted the rate recommendations and implemented them in May 2018.



SAVE THE DATE!

SepticSmart Week 2019

September 16–20, 2019

Start early!

SepticSmart Week is an annual event focused on educating homeowners and communities on the proper care and maintenance of their septic systems.

Visit www.epa.gov/septic for more resources and information about SepticSmart Week 2019.





The Joy of Retirement

Twenty-three years ago I was coming to the end of my tenure as Water and Sanitation Specialist for the Peace Corps, a headquarters staff position. I envisioned my dream job, which would be to work for an organization doing the same community capacity development around water and sanitation, but with communities across the United States. My colleague from Peace Corps, Randy Adams, soon became the Executive Director of RCAP, and we met periodically to discuss the mission of the organization he headed. I learned that the work I dreamed of was being carried out by this entity. Randy and I appreciated the value of community development concepts - which had been the guiding principles of our Peace Corps ethic - to RCAP's work. When an RCAP job opened to manage EPA grants, I was able to join the organization in the late 1990s. (I left for three years to head an EPA center at the University of Colorado, but - fortunately - was able to return to RCAP.)

The past two decades have been characterized by a strong sense of purpose and appreciation for RCAP network staff. RCAP employees are passionate and dedicated, and have taught me a lot - about technical issues, of course, but also about holistic community capacity development. It's been a delight to see real strengthening of communities' leadership and problem-solving skills, "second-tier benefits" of the water infrastructure training and assistance provided by RCAP. Highlights of my work with RCAP are varied in nature. In the late 1990s, it was an honor to work with EPA in defining capacity. Heading the Training Work Group has been stimulating and gratifying, collaborating with training staff from every region to strengthen skills of network staff and provide tools they can use with their communities and training audiences. There were gratifying opportunities to share my water quality and treatment expertise for training and problem-solving. I made some visits to communities, where I actually got my hands wet providing technical assistance. And I succeeded in bringing in funding to help secure RCAP's training and assistance for the next few years. It's been a great profession!

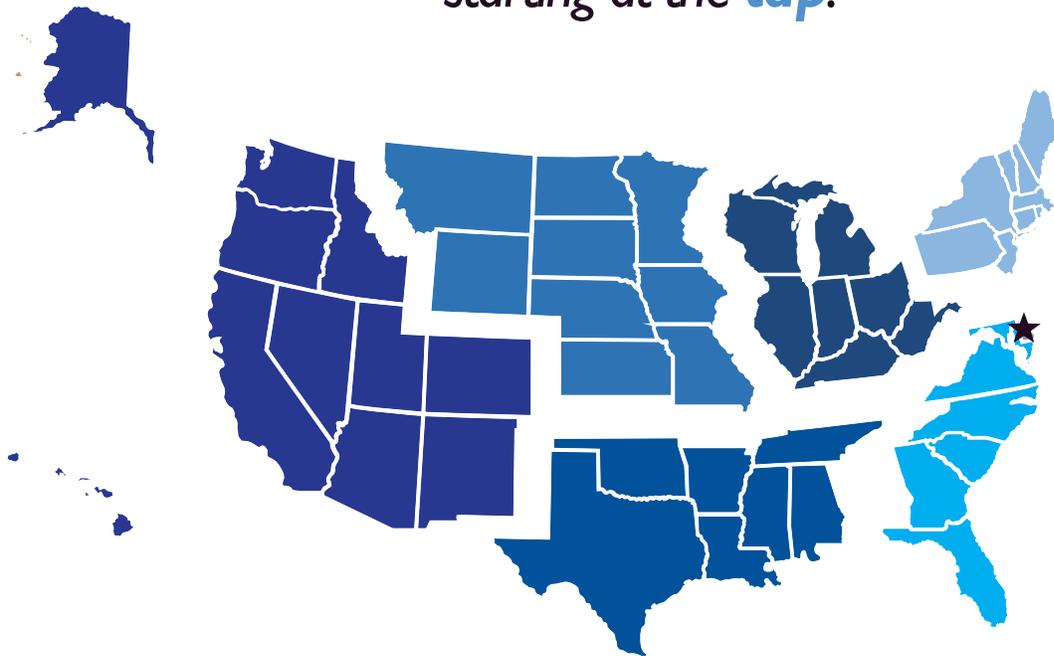
Looking back, I feel so fortunate to have been able to earn a living by helping provide improved public health and environmental conditions for rural people across the country. It's been fantastic to be able to forge a merger between my environmental engineering expertise and capacity development in rural and tribal communities. In the near future I will be retiring from salaried water work to turn my focus to stakeholders without a voice - watersheds and their non-human inhabitants.

I am forever grateful to you, my RCAP colleagues, for your kindness, dedication, and hard work. I wish RCAP and its stellar employees the best in the future.

Joy Barrett
Director of Training and Technical Services

Rural Community Assistance Partnership

*A non-profit network reaching rural and small communities in all fifty states to improve quality of life by starting at the **tap**.*



Puerto Rico and USVI
(Northeast RCAP)

Western RCAP

Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC)
3120 Freeboard Drive, Suite 201
West Sacramento, CA 95691
(916) 447-2854
www.rcac.org

Midwest RCAP

Midwest Assistance Program (MAP)
303 N. Market St., Suite 2
Maryville, MO 64468
(660) 562-2575
www.map-inc.org

Southern RCAP

Communities Unlimited
3 East Colt Square Drive
Fayetteville, AR 72703
(479) 443-2700
www.communitiessu.org

Northeast RCAP

RCAP Solutions
205 School Street
Gardner, MA 01440
(800) 488-1969
www.rcapsolutions.org

Great Lakes RCAP

WSOS Community Action Commission
P.O. Box 590
219 S. Front St., 2nd Floor
Fremont, OH 43420
(800) 775-9767
www.glracap.org

Southeast RCAP

Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP)
347 Campbell Ave. SW
Roanoke, VA 24016
(866) 928-3731
www.seracap.org

★ **RCAP National Office** ★
1701 K Street NW, Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20006
(202) 408-1273 • (800) 321-7227
www.rcap.org



1701 K Street NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006

