

MEMO

Date: 3/12/24

To: Board of Trustees

From: Virgil Farnen

Through: Tom Ratermann

Subject: Justification for a Lead Operator Position
Qualification of Current Promotable Staff

Justification

The question came up at a recent Board meeting; Was the Lead Operator position necessary? To answer this question a little history is in order and listed below.

In June of 2019 the Operations Manager (OM) retired. In August of 2019 the Operations Supervisor was promoted to Operations Manager. The Operations Supervisor position remains vacant. At the July 2020 Board meeting, it was requested that a Lead Operator position be created to take on some of the responsibilities of the vacant Operations Supervisor. This position was approved and a Senior Operator was promoted to Lead Operator. Starting in November of 2022 the Lead Operator, because of health reasons, was unable to work fulltime. Over time his abilities declined even more. After his Earned-Time-Off and FMLA was exhausted, he submitted his resignation in January 2024.

Since August 2021, the District has started contract operations of 3 municipalities. The facility, type of treatment, and number of connections are as follows:

Sturgeon – 2 Cell Lagoon, Reservoir, Center Pivot Irrigation, 4 lift stations and 430 connections

Ashland – 0.6 MGD AeroMod TP, 19 lift stations and 2095 connections

Renick - Lagoon/Reservoir, Fixed Sprinkler Irrigation, 3 lift stations and 90 connection

There are added responsibilities and skills the Lead Operator has over a Senior Operator, they are;

- Operates the Districts most technically advanced wastewater treatment system.
- Conducts the monthly, quarterly, and annual in-house lab analysis.
- Is relied on to help troubleshoot and train junior employees on electrical controls, troubleshooting.
- Is the 3rd Back-up On-Call respondent when the OM is the Secondary responder.

- Takes on the responsibility of timekeeping, prioritizing task, lab management, dispatching and operational issues when they arise if OM is absent.
- Must have extensive knowledge of the Districts treatment and collections systems.
- Lead Operator position salary approved in the 2024 Budget.

The District has taken on more duties and responsibilities with no increase in staff. The staff we have has been tasked with more responsibilities and higher expectations. In the past, the Operations Supervisor and Operations Manager worked closely and each was aware of the others duties, responsibilities, customer issues, operations and maintenance issues. Absence by either position was not noticed.

Currently, the District’s Senior Operator is filling in the best they can when the OM is absent. They have not taken on the responsibility of performing the lab testing to date, because we are short handed and there is a greater need for the work in the field to be completed. When fully staffed in Operations, the Lead Operator would take on this responsibility. They would also be more aware of the daily issues that arise.

Qualifications

The District has three potential candidates for the Lead Operator position. All three are Certified “A” Level Wastewater Operators. All three have traits that would work well in this position. In fact, I believe selection will be difficult until applications are received and interviews have taken place.

Current Position	Certification Level	# of Years as Certified Operator	Years Employed by District
Senior WW Operator	A	25	21
Senior WW/EQ Operator	A	16	11
Senior WW/EQ Operator	A	11	8

Some thought has been put into advertising the position and see if there are qualified and interested applicants available. This option has a few distinct drawbacks if selected;

- The applicant would need a year learning our systems and locations.
 - The transition period for a ‘new’ position would require 2 operators rotating in the same areas throughout this time period with the only added benefit being the training of the new hire
- Hiring from the outside in this role would have an adverse effect on the morale of the current team. Therefore, this opportunity should be given to experienced staff for career advancement
- This option provides for a status quo on staffing levels as filling internal would not require additional staff. This essentially maintains staffing budget near current levels/costs
 - Promoting a ‘Lead Operator’ from within is already included in the 2024 operating budget
- I would propose a 6-month probationary period that would afford me the opportunity to develop the selected candidate. Clear metrics will be identified for the selected employee to achieve during this time period. If these are not satisfactorily met then the employee would revert back to their original position.

Input from the Board for this hire or promotion is appreciated, though the decision of whom to hire or promote rests with the Operations Manager.

I am asking for help, I have taken on the responsibility of 2 positions and 3 new contract operations, with a decreasing workforce. When Russ was the Lead Operator I could rely on him to troubleshoot and train coworkers on treatment and control issues. I need someone reliable and familiar with our systems that can start on day one.