



A Special Anniversary

NESCC Celebrates 30 Years Serving America's Small Communities

Do you remember 1979? Jimmy Carter was president and the Iranian hostage crisis began in November. *Saturday Night Fever* by the Bee Gees was the Album of the Year as the disco craze swept the country. In sports, Pittsburgh celebrated both World Series and Super Bowl championships.

1979 also marked the beginning of the National Small Flows Clearinghouse (NSFC), the founding organization of what would become the National Environmental Services Center (NESCC). Like many stories, NESCC's history has its ups and downs, its triumphs and tragedies. Ultimately, though, it speaks to the power of a

good idea and the tenacity of a few people seeking to help society achieve a fundamental goal: stellar water quality for all.

A Modest Start

The need for a clearinghouse that dealt with information on innovative and alternative wastewater systems for small communities was first recognized in the Clean Water Act of 1977. Jim Kreissel, NSFC's original project officer with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), said that the EPA began searching for a location for the clearinghouse as well as sketching out the structure of a clearinghouse.

"We worked with a contractor and spent a significant amount of money laying out how a clearinghouse should run," he says.

At about the same time, two West Virginia University (WVU) professors, Willem Van Eck and Raul Zaltzman, were on sabbaticals from the university to work with the EPA in Washington, D.C. Both Zaltzman, a professor of civil engineering, and Van Eck, a professor of soil and water resources, worked with West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph to put the NSFC at WVU. The clearinghouse received Clean Water Act funding and formally started in 1979.

The Early Years

With a handful of employees, the clearinghouse set up shop in the basement of the Centennial House in Morgantown, West Virginia. Along with Zaltzman and Van Eck, other faculty reviewed technical articles that were published in journals and magazines. University graduate students also helped review and abstract the information, which then was put into a bibliographic database of literature about small wastewater systems.

Just as the clearinghouse was completing its first year of operation, it was blindsided by tragedy. In April 1980, Zaltzman and Paul Moe, another faculty member affiliated with the program, were killed in a car wreck. Later that year, Marion Jones, database and conference coordinator, died from cancer. Those who were on staff at the time recall that they weren't sure whether or not the NSFC would continue.

In January 1981, though, the clearinghouse hired Steve Dix, a professional engineer who had been working at the Larimer County Health Department in Fort Collins, Colorado, to direct the program. Almost immediately, Dix was presented with a serious problem as EPA funding was significantly reduced. "Over the next few years, EPA shuffled publication money, and borrowed funds from a number of programs to keep the clearinghouse's phone turned on and literature review and database alive," Dix recalls. "It was a closet operation that ran on a shoestring."

Despite the funding challenges, Dix established a training program for all of EPA's regional offices. Funding from this endeavor allowed him to hire additional staff.

Soon after, the clearinghouse made the second of its four moves.



The Growth Years

Although funding was tight during the initial years, the reauthorization of the Clean Water Act in 1987 provided for a significant increase in EPA's funding support for the clearinghouse. As the new funding turned into increased activity, the NSFC had to move to a larger location to accommodate the growing staff. So, the clearinghouse packed up and moved again, this time to a former bank building in downtown Morgantown. The location proved to be puzzling to some local residents when they would enter the building to make a deposit or seek a loan.

The former bank also provided some interesting interior arrangements. "All of our products were housed in the vault of the bank," says Trina Wafle, who was hired as a writer/editor for NSFC and is now the associate director of the National Research Center for Coal and Energy (NRCCE), the larger entity within which NESCS is housed. "The diamond of the clearinghouse's business is this information dissemination, and at one point, it was ironically housed in a bank vault."

By 1991, two new programs joined NSFC, the National Environmental Training Center for Small Communities (NETCSC) and the National Drinking Water Clearinghouse (NDWC). Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utilities Service, the NDWC was modeled on NSFC and was designed to house drinking water information for America's small communities. NETCSC, funded by EPA, was created to supply materials specifically for environmental trainers working with small communities.

A fourth program, the National Onsite Demonstration Project, was added in 1993 to meet demands for demonstrations of cost-effective and environmentally sound onsite wastewater technologies. Also that year, the programs made the fourth move to the NRCCE building on the Evansdale Campus of WVU. This remains NESCS's location today.

During this time, John Mori, Ph.D., became the director and the programs were organized as WVU's Environmental Services and Training Division. Not satisfied with this name, Mori began the move toward consolidating all the work under the NESCS umbrella.

Mori recalls his tenure as one characterized by sweeping changes. "When I came here in 1990, there was no Internet; it was a different era," he says. "But since then there has been an explosion in the information age. So we had to refocus and clarify our goals and missions over the years to stay in a good position as a national repository.

"Another thing that happened was an explosion in onsite technology," he observes, "and the clearinghouse had to keep up with that technology and understand the pluses and the minuses of it." Mori retired in 2004.

Funding Challenges Resurface

After a decade of steadily increasing support from both EPA and USDA, NESCS suffered a huge blow in 2005 as funding for NSFC and NETCSC were cut. Other national organizations felt the effects of an \$80 million decrease in federal funds for EPA. To address the lack of money, NESCS stretched the funds it had and 15 employees were reassigned to other WVU departments, while others left altogether.

NRCCE administrators Richard Bajura, Trina Wafle, and Frank Saus began overseeing NESCS's day-to-day operations and helped secure transitional funding. The remaining staff, many of whom had been with NESCS for years, assumed additional responsibilities and searched for new money sources.

Despite the funding woes, NESCS still provided services that people had come to expect from the organization: a toll-free technical assistance hotline, hundreds of free and low-cost products, training materials, a comprehensive Web site, and the publications *On Tap*, *Small Flows*, and *Pipeline*. Fortunately, USDA support for the drinking water grant continued.

What's In Store

In 2008, NESCS began an 18-month source water protection effort funded by EPA. SMART About Water was a \$3 million collaborative project with the Rural Community Assistance partnership featuring numerous activities designed to help communities develop source

water and wellhead protection plans with an emphasis on addressing failing septic systems. Later in the year, NESCS received two grants from the West Virginia Bureau of Public Health to develop training tools for the state's small water systems and was selected to conduct a water efficiency project with EPA's Water Sense program.

Following a year-long, national search, Gerald R. Iwan, Ph.D., joined NESCS as executive director in April 2008. Prior to moving to Morgantown, Iwan, was chief of the Water Supplies Section of the Connecticut Department of Health. He has also worked in environmental protection in New York City and has served in a leadership capacity in several national organizations dealing with water and the environment.

"I was and am delighted to join NESCS, and hope to continue and enhance the organization's long and highly regarded tradition of education and service to the water, waste, and wastewater sectors," Iwan says. "The next few years are going to be exciting, considering population growth, public health, climate, economy, security, and social restructuring. The need for reliable infrastructure, safe, sustainable drinking water resources, and sound waste and wastewater management systems and practices will become even more apparent as we wrestle with these and other emerging issues.

"Regardless of what the future holds, you can expect the same great service you've always gotten from NESCS," Iwan continues. "We intend to be here for a 40th anniversary and beyond."

Portions of this article originally appeared in the Spring 2004 Small Flows article "That Was Then, This Is Now," written by former NESCS Staff Writer Nikki Stiles about the 25th anniversary of the National Small Flows Clearinghouse.



Mark Kemp-Rye, NESCS communications manager and *On Tap* editor, began working for NESCS in 1998.

