



Honoring the Past - Preparing for the Future

By: Roger Noe, Deputy Director

June 2026
Newsletter

Water
Quality
Partnership
Program

The Illinois Rural Water Association (IRWA) stands as a vital partner to hundreds of communities across the state, working behind the scenes to ensure that safe drinking water flows reliably and that wastewater systems operate effectively. For decades, IRWA has delivered training, technical assistance, and our newer program workforce development to support local systems. Many serve a small, rural population with limited resources but immense responsibility.

Today, the Association finds itself at a meaningful turning point. In the coming months, four respected and experienced members of the IRWA team will retire. They are: Training Specialists Dave McMillian and Steve Vance, Apprenticeship Coordinator Jeff Tumiati, and Wastewater Technician Jeff McCready. Their departures mark more than staffing changes—they represent the closing of an important chapter in IRWA’s history, and the beginning of a new phase shaped by transition, opportunity, and continued commitment to service.

At the heart of IRWA’s mission is education, and few have contributed more to that mission than Dave McMillian and Steve Vance. As Training Specialists, both men have played an essential role in equipping water professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to meet ever-evolving regulatory standards, operator complex systems, and respond to real-world challenges.

Dave McMillian’s career reflects a lifetime of service to the water industry. He is known for his depth of knowledge, passion, directiveness, and dependable presence. Dave has been instrumental in developing and delivering training programs that are both practical and impactful. Whether leading a classroom session, facilitating hands-on instructions, or offering guidance to operators navigating difficult situations, he has consistently brought clarity, professionalism and a willingness to help others succeed. His approach has never been about simply presenting information; it has been about ensuring understanding. Dave has mentored countless operators and coworkers, many of whom have gone on to become leaders in their own systems. His influence extends far beyond the training room, embedded in the day-to-day operations of water systems across Illinois.

Steve Vance has shared that same commitment to excellence, while bringing his own unique style and approach to the role. With a strong background in regulatory and field experience, Steve has been a trusted resource for systems seeking both technical guidance and practical solutions. His ability to connect with people, whether seasoned operators or those entering the field, has made him an exceptional educator and advisor.

Steve’s training sessions have often gone beyond instruction, fostering confidence and encouraging problem solving. He has helped to clarify complex regulations, making them accessible and manageable for operators responsible for protecting public health. In doing so, he has strengthened not just individual skill sets, but overall resilience of the systems IRWA serves.

Together, Dave and Steve have helped IRWA’s training program, creating a culture of continuous learning that will endure long after their retirements.

While training current professionals is essential, preparing the future workforce is equally critical and that responsibility has been championed by Jeff Tumiati in his role as Apprenticeship Coordinator. The water and wastewater industry is facing a well-documented workforce challenge. Across the country, a significant percentage of experienced operators are nearing retirement, creating an urgent need to attract, train, and retain new talent. Recognizing this, National Rural Water Association has invested in apprenticeship program designed to provide structured pathways into the profession.

Jeff Tumiati has been at the forefront of this effort. Through his leadership, the apprenticeship program has become a model for workforce development in Illinois, combining classroom instruction with hand-on, real world experience. Participants are not only learning technical skills but also gaining an understanding of the responsibility and importance of their work. Jeff’s impact goes beyond program administration. He has been a mentor, an advocate, and a connector linking aspiring operators with opportunities and guiding them through the early stages of their careers. His work has helped ensure that knowledge is passed down rather than lost, creating continuity in an industry where experience is invaluable. Thanks to Jeff’s efforts, IRWA is better positioned to meet the challenges of this future, with a growing pipeline of trained and motivated professionals ready to step into critical roles.

While training and workforce development are essential components of IRWA’s mission, the organization’s work in the field is equally important. That mission has been carried forward by individuals like Jeff McCready, whose role as Wastewater Technician has brought direct, hands-on support to communities throughout Illinois. Wastewater systems are complex and often operate with limited staffing and resources, particularly in rural areas. When challenges arise whether mechanical, environmental, or regulatory, local operators rely on experienced professionals who can provide guidance and assistance. Jeff McCready has been one of those trusted professionals. His work has taken him into communities where he has helped troubleshoot problems, improve operations, and ensure compliance with environmental standards. Importantly, his approach has always emphasized education and empowerment working alongside local staff to build their capacity and confidence. Jeff’s contributions have had a direct impact on public health and environmental protection. Every system improved, every issue resolved, and every operator supported represents a tangible benefit to the communities IRWA serves.

The retirement of these four individuals reflects a broader reality facing the water and wastewater sector. Nationwide, the industry is experiencing a wave of retirement that will reshape the workforce in the coming years. The shift brings both challenges and opportunities. For IRWA, the challenges are preserving the institutional knowledge and expertise built over decades. The experience held by professionals like Dave, Steve, Jeff Tumiati, and Jeff McCready cannot be replaced overnight. It represents years of learning, problem-solving, and service. At the same time, there is a clear opportunity to build on that foundation. New technologies, evolving regulations, and changing workforce expectations require fresh perspectives and innovative approaches. By investing in training, apprenticeship programs and recruitment, IRWA is actively preparing to meet this moment. This organization’s strength has always been its ability to adapt while staying true to its core mission: supporting systems that provide safe water and effective wastewater treatment to Illinois communities.

As Dave McMillian, Steve Vance, Jeff Tumiati, and Jeff McCready prepare to retire, their legacy is already firmly established. It can be seen in the operators they have trained, the systems they have improved, and the relationships they have built over the years. Their work has not only supported individual communities, but it has also strengthened the entire network of rural water and wastewater systems across Illinois. They have helped ensure that communities have access to safe drinking water that communities can grow and thrive, and that environmental standards are upheld.



A Few Final Words

By: Steve Vance, EPA Training Specialist

In February of 2022, I began working for Illinois Rural Water Association (IRWA) after retiring from the Illinois EPA (Agency). I had worked at the Agency for twenty-eight years and working part-time for IRWA seemed like a great transition from working full-time and being able to remain in the industry.

In my initial article written for IRWA's publication, I described the trajectory of my career in the water industry and listed some people that have guided me through my years in operations, regulatory enforcement and finally, technical assistance and operator training. On July 31st of this year, I will be retiring for a second time.

After approximately thirty-eight years in the industry, I reflect back on people and events that formed my career. First, Charlie Brockmeyer hired me to work full-time at the Farmersville water and wastewater plant after graduating from high school and working for two summers previously. Charlie is gone now, but his guidance was formative in my interest in the water industry. Upon graduating from college with a degree in Civil Engineering (I resisted college for a few years), I began working for IEPA. During my years at IEPA, I was fortunate to work with a lot of good people that shared the belief that our jobs were to work for the people of Illinois and provide assistance in any way possible. Those people included Mary Reed, Andrea Rhodes, Dave Cook, Jon Lam, Tony Dulka, Segundo Nallatan and Rick Cobb, to name a few.

My final chapter included four and a half years at IRWA. Frank Dunmire hired Dave McMillan, myself and Mary Reed to join the existing staff in assisting water and wastewater systems maneuver through technical, managerial, financial and regulatory issues that utilities routinely face. While IRWA staff primarily work to assist systems, I will always have fond memories of the various conferences IRWA attends

and the genuine friendships that were developed during social settings, as well as, during collaborative technical assistance activities. A big thank you to the IRWA staff for making my job easier and enjoyable. A special thank you to Heather and Denise for all that you do behind the scenes to lighten administrative duties and make me a little more organized. Mostly, thank you to Frank for giving me the chance to work for IRWA. Frank was a great boss and we shared an interest in good bourbon.

Also, a big thanks to Dave McMillan. Dave and I have worked together for 30+ years at the Agency and IRWA. We have solved problems, created problems, agreed, and argued, but mostly we have tried to do the right thing for the systems and people that we have worked for and with.

Most importantly, I want to thank all of you in this industry for trusting me and allowing me to help you meet some of your challenges. While I hope that I have been able to provide something that has helped in some way, please understand that many of you have been influential in making better at what I do through sharing your knowledge and experiences.

Finally, I encourage everyone in the industry to keep fighting the good fight and remember that the ultimate goal is protecting public health. While additional and evolving regulations have made our jobs more difficult, it's important to do the right thing even when no one is watching. Complacency and shortcuts are enemies and minimize your ability to achieve the ultimate goal. Also, remember that you are never too old to learn and gravitate toward good people that can make you better at what you do. Thanks again for being part of my enjoyable and rewarding career.

IRWA'S MISSION STATEMENT

“Protecting and preserving the water and wastewater resources of Rural Illinois through education, representation and on-site technical assistance”



IRWA Support Letters Are Needed

IRWA employees are dedicated in helping the water and wastewater systems throughout the state in making onsite visits and providing technical assistance in helping to ensure your systems have safe and quality water. Please take a moment to thank any or all of the IRWA employees who have helped your system by writing an appreciation letter on your letterhead and mail to:

Illinois Rural Water Association
P.O. Box 49
Taylorville, IL 62568



IRWA's New Energy Efficiency Tech

By: Rodney Phillips

I started in the Water & Wastewater industry in 1999, with the Village of Moweaqua, as the assistant supervisor to both the Street and Water & Wastewater Departments, under two great public works directors.

Moweaqua, Illinois at that time, had a Class B water plant and a Class 4 sewer plant...with a typical daily water usage of 180,000 gallons. Our storage consisted of an 800,000 gallon reservoir, and a 150,000 gallon water tower. I was in charge of the monthly meter readings, and was fortunate to inherit a program that consisted of 600 out of 836 Badger meter, touch reads.

As for the Street Department side of things, we kept the roads and alleys oiled, did monthly brush pickup, fall leaf pickup, mowing of all municipal properties and more! In the mid 1990's, the Moweaqua Memorial Tree Park was started by the council and a few volunteers. As it grew, more time was spent maintaining it through mowing, pruning, mulching and putting in the identification plaques. Some of my more memorable experiences with the Village of Moweaqua, would be putting in a fire hydrant on 9/11, and hearing about the planes on my way to get parts. Also, having a main break at 3:00 p.m., and missing the Alice Cooper concert....even though both of my bosses said to go! I can't say enough good things about Moweaqua! I guess that's why I've lived there my entire life.

In 2015, I had the opportunity to become a water operator with the City of Decatur. Notably, I went from being used to 180,000 gallons a day usage, to 20 MGD, and 150 pounds of chlorine a week, to 400

pounds a day, and from ground water to surface water...and the list goes on. Decatur has a Class "A" surface water treatment plant, so I had the "privilege" of taking the Class "A" water certification exam.... Don't give up, it can be done!

The Decatur plant has under gone some extensive upgrades the past few years, including 2 new claricones, a hydrated lime system, a gas to liquid chlorine system removing the evaporator and peristaltic chemical feed pumps. My most enjoyable task was watching the lake level and making the appropriate adjustments when needed. All parts of being an operator are important. But like many, I often feel that the general public doesn't always understand what all a municipal worker does for their community water and wastewater systems. Hopefully, I'm wrong about that, but it does lead me to the final chapter of becoming IRWA's Energy Efficiency Technician.

I've always respected what Illinois Rural Water Association stands for, in their overall training and assistance to smaller rural community water and wastewater systems, in whatever way possible. I was thrilled when given the opportunity to come to work for IRWA, and end my career with the organization. Even though starting a new endeavor at 56 is a bit scary, I wanted to take the chance and help in whatever way possible! I'm truly looking forward to getting out there and meeting as many operators as I can and learning some new treatment processes.

See you in my travels.

The IRWA Office will be closed the Following Days:

Friday, July 3 - (observance of) Independence Day

Monday, September 7—Labor Day

IRWA
ILLINOIS RURAL WATER
ASSOCIATION

**Administrative
Conference**

July 16 & 17, 2026

Holiday Inn * Effingham, IL



Teachable Moments

By: **Marc Lemrise, Apprenticeship Training Coordinator**

“To err is human” There’s a second half to that famous quote but today I just want to focus on the first half. Water and wastewater treatment plants are operated and maintained by humans. So, until robots can run the plant, there are going to be some errors. Maybe a lot of them. Over a 35-year career in water and wastewater treatment, I’ve made my share of mistakes and a few of them were doozies. Fortunately, no one got hurt.

Failure is a tool that can be used to positive effect, if and only if one adopts the attitude that after mistakes are made, a person must reflect on how to avoid repeating them. To take it one step further, incorporating that attitude into training new employees can magnify the benefits.

No one likes to admit that they overflowed the water tower, underfed a chemical, or forgot to dot all the “i’s” and cross all the “t’s” on IEPA reports. Taking risks, where safety is concerned, is never a good idea, but most of us have done it when we were in our 20’s; either through ignorance of the hazards or lack of patience.

Pretending that you are infallible helps no one. Admitting that you’ve been there and done that with disastrous results is a much more believable way of tattooing an important idea onto someone else’s brain. Having said that, I feel obligated to share a few mistakes with the world right here. Not proud of them by any means, but well worth the embarrassment if anyone can learn from them. I’ll include one maintenance error, 1 paperwork error, and the most egregious, a safety violation.

#1: Chemical feed pump maintenance.

Most chemical feed pumps are plugged into a 120-volt outlet that is only energized while the pumps are running. If repairs are to be made to a chemical feed pump, one usually has to plug it into a different outlet to make it run for testing. During my testing run, while making adjustments, the system pressure dropped sufficiently to make the plant come to life. The well pump, high service pump, 4 chemical feed pumps, were all running smoothly; and the chlorine and phosphate residuals perfect. With the controls on automatic; just lock up the plant and move on with my day. If the plant had not started, I would have heard the chemical feed pump running, and plugged it into the correct outlet. But it did... and I didn’t.

The next day, while making rounds, the first thing I noticed was, that although the plant wasn’t running, one chemical feed pump was. OOPS! We fed about 10 times as much sodium hypochlorite as normal. Most of that overfeed never left the plant as it wasn’t running. We were able to flush all that out before it was able to get into the distribution system. Distribution residuals confirmed this and I breathed a sigh of relief.

#2: “Bac-ti” chain of custody.

This one is a much shorter story. One time, I left the chlorine residual entry spot blank on a Bac-ti chain of custody. A week later, I got a call from IEPA along with a letter demanding public notice be distributed to every customer stating that on that specific day, the city could not guarantee that the water was bacteriologically safe; despite the lab results indicating no presence of coliform; and distribution chlorine sampling showed adequate residuals elsewhere in the system. Conclusion: Double check your paperwork.

#3: Excavation safety.

In 2001 while replacing an old clay 12” drain tile with a larger one, we ran into some sandy soil. Since I give many presentations on excavation safety, including soil analysis, it may seem surprising that I would be involved in a trenching incident. I could honestly plead ignorance at the time, but that’s no excuse as an ignorant person has no business being in charge. Someone trained on the full spectrum of excavation safety must be designated to inspect conditions and have the authority to act accordingly; even shutting the job down temporarily. Luckily, we weren’t terribly deep and when part of the wall caved in, the man in the trench was standing on top of the new 20” pipe and only got buried thigh-deep with no injuries. That could have been really bad. Nonetheless, it’s a teachable moment. An opportunity to help someone improve as an operator. Pass it on. There are many new operators in the field with tremendous potential. Many can run every aspect of the system they operate, including management. They only lack certification. For those who have taken the state exam several times for their plant classification, don’t get discouraged. Use the failure to improve. Continue to build on your existing knowledge until you pass that test, and some day you may be training new employees. When that happens, don’t be afraid to admit your mistakes.



UPCOMING IRWA EVENTS

IRWA Administrative Conference	-	July 16 & 17, 2026	-	Effingham
IRWA 23rd Annual Golf Outing	-	August 21, 2026	-	Auburn
IRWA Northern Conference	-	October 27 & 28	-	Rockford

Please look online at www.ilrwa.org for the most up to date IRWA calendar of events.