

Coordinating Success



Our Environment.
Our Future.

Return to Basics

As DEQ Executive Director Steve Thompson, stated, “It is time to take the show on the road and discuss issues that are important to our communities.” With that objective in mind, DEQ staff began planning a series of regional meetings with its stakeholders. The meetings, named “DEQ 101,” were originally developed to discuss some of the newer federal and state environmental regulations. However, it soon became clear that, although new rules needed to be discussed, there were concerns about DEQ’s existing rules that needed resolution, too. The Customer Services Division organized the sessions, and all DEQ divisions were represented on the agency panel at each meeting. Over the course of four months, meetings were held throughout Oklahoma enabling DEQ staff to answer questions and address topics important to communities.

Many topics were discussed at the DEQ 101 meetings. One example is the federal Lead and Copper drinking water rule (LCR). After being in place for more than 15 years, the rule has accomplished most, if not all, of the goals for which it was intended. Leaded water distribution pipes have been removed, plumbing fixtures are now manufactured with an increasingly lower percentage of lead, and older plumbing has a significantly lower occurrence of lead and copper violations. The reduction is due to a protective coating of scale that has naturally built up on the interior of the line, thereby reducing the possibility of pipe materials leaching into the water.

The availability of funds and grant money was on the minds of many in attendance at the forums. DEQ suggested that regionalization be considered by many of the communities. DEQ plans to offer subsidized funding methods to public water supply (PWS) systems that propose the consolidation of services. DEQ will help with grants totaling as much as 90 percent of the total cost of projects where consolidation is achieved.

Additionally, DEQ 101 included information on the proper removal and disposal of asbestos as well as the containment of lead-based paint, issues that can directly affect the ambient air. DEQ ensures that asbestos is removed and disposed of properly, protecting the public from serious health effects of inhaled fibers at renovation and demolition sites. The lead-based paint program provides testing and certification to handymen, painters and others in direct contact with the paint. This training and certification limits citizen exposure to lead-based paint.

The Land Protection Division (LPD) discussed opportunities for grant funding, technical assistance, and cost-effective disposal options for waste tires and dilapidated structures. For example, the Brownfields Program offers Phase I and II site assessments to local governments interested in acquiring and/or redeveloping property that may be contaminated. This program assesses, at no cost to the local government, whether environmental contaminants are present on property and provides options for cleanup. The Phase I assessment also meets the All Appropriate

Inquiry (environmental due diligence) requirement for purchasing commercial property, which can provide protection from environmental liability under the federal Superfund law.

The Community Assistance Program (CAP) offers regulatory and technical assistance for cities and towns that have dilapidated structures to remove. DEQ works with the local governments and the Conservation District to formulate a disposal plan for these structures that avoids transportation and disposal costs by using the debris as fill in nearby eroded areas, covering the debris with soil and establishing vegetation. This solution saves the local government money and also reclaims land. LPD also described opportunities for local governments

At its DEQ 101 forums, DEQ staff answered a variety of questions and discussed topics important to communities.

to get rid of illegal waste tire dumps and to host community tire collection events.

The events also offered a learning experience for DEQ staff members. A recurring theme at the DEQ 101 meetings was the need for DEQ staff to be more responsive to community needs. Simply returning phone calls and e-mails more quickly would foster better communication between DEQ and its customers. The message resonated with agency leaders, and DEQ continues to make changes necessary to improve in this area.

DEQ 101 accomplished more than its intended goal. DEQ hopes the public participants learned as much from the experience as agency staff did. ■

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Our Facility Program Reaches Maturity



The DEQ Our Facility program was born in spring 2008. DEQ recognized that the collective efforts of three of its divisions, Environment Complaints and Local Services (ECLS), Water Quality Division (WQD), and Customer Services Division (CSD), could effect significant changes in small communities across Oklahoma. Many of these smaller communities have struggled for years with serious wastewater collection and treatment issues. Our Facility was originally conceived as a means for DEQ to help focus community attention and resources on the problems at hand.

In the first year, more than 25 communities were identified as good candidates for DEQ assistance. For each community, a staff member from ECLS and WQD formed a team to provide routine site visits and technical assistance to ensure that local officials remained focused on solutions to long-standing infrastructure problems. CSD assumed the role of facilitating meetings of an internal agency steering committee charged with keeping the program moving. During that first year, 13 communities were declared success stories, meaning a solution had been reached or was well in progress.

In the second year, a handful of water systems were added to the target list, along with some new wastewater systems to replace those projects that had reached completion. Again, DEQ assistance teams were

The condition of the wastewater treatment lagoons for the City of Wilson before the repair project began.

formed. When possible, DEQ pledged limited funding through grants for engineering services or to defray construction costs. The partnerships between DEQ and the communities continued to grow and more facility issues were resolved.

By fiscal year 2011, the concept of state and local cooperation born out of the Our Facility program became engrained in many DEQ staff members. Strong teams were formed to tackle a growing list of problems facing small communities. More than 30 water and wastewater facilities now make up the Our Facility list.

One notable success involved the City of Wilson in Carter County. Debbie Taylor of ECLS and Holley Vinson of WQD worked closely to spearhead DEQ's outreach to city officials to address the city's wastewater problems. The issues included a leaking collection system, severe dike erosion, and an outfall structure in need of major work to improve the operation of the sewer lagoon system. Through routine meetings with city officials, Taylor and Vinson helped the city make major progress toward correcting its wastewater issues. In October 2010, the City of Wilson received an award from the Oklahoma Rural Water Association (ORWA) as the most improved wastewater system in the state. As evidenced through success stories like the City of Wilson's, it's easy to see how the Our Facility program has become a way of life for DEQ staff and how small communities around Oklahoma are reaping the benefits of these efforts. ■

The award-winning Wilson wastewater lagoons after the rehabilitation process.



Twister Impacts Lake Thunderbird Environment



On May 10, 2010, a total of 35 tornadoes were documented in Oklahoma, one of the largest documented tornado outbreaks in Oklahoma history. ECLS staff immediately began contacting public water supply and wastewater systems to assess damages. A total of 28 systems had various degrees of impairment and most were dealing with power outages.

One tornado-impacted property was the Central Oklahoma Master Conservancy District (COMCD). A twister crossed Lake Thunderbird and severely damaged a local marina. Approximately 300 boats were wrecked, and an 8000-gallon fuel tank that contained 2000 gallons of gasoline was lifted out of a three-foot tall concrete secondary containment structure and tossed into the lake. DEQ staff worked with numerous local, state and federal entities to ensure that the lake, which provides drinking water to the region, was safe.

Travis Mensik, ECLS, and Don Tullius, WQD, went to the lake to survey the destruction and assess the PWS intake structure for COMCD which serves Norman, Del City and Midwest City. CSD arranged a sampling protocol and performed analyses for each of these PWS systems to ensure the safety of the drinking water. Randy Parham and Brian Magott from CSD launched a DEQ boat and surveyed the lake for visible petroleum sheens. They also sampled the lake near the marina and the public water

A May 2010 tornado damaged boats stored at the Lake Thunderbird marina.

supply intake to determine the extent of any pollution.

Meanwhile, ECLS and DEQ administrative staff coordinated with EPA, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, Thunderbird State Park officials, the marina owner and cleanup contractors to coordinate cleanup and restoration efforts. A boom was placed around the marina to contain fuel from the wreckage. A crane was used to remove the commercial fuel tank from the lake, and records were reviewed to verify that little, if any, fuel was lost from the tank.

ECLS continued to monitor the cleanup efforts for more than two months. Wrecked boats had to be removed and the fuel contained, and tornado debris had to be cleaned up and disposed, which included incineration, recycling and disposal in landfills. A local "Friends of Lake Thunderbird" group organized an effort to clean up the storm debris that covered the shorelines. The volunteers removed large quantities of Styrofoam, gas cans, propane bottles, and other trash strewn across the lake. Thanks to the team effort of local, state and federal partners, the response and remediation of the impacts of this natural disaster were addressed in a timely and efficient manner. ■

A tornado left debris on the shore of Lake Thunderbird.

