

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.



In its last Report Card, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the country's water and wastewater infrastructure a grade of D- and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates it would cost as much as \$1 trillion to get these systems up to date.

Editorial Advisory Board

Jerry Biberstine

Senior Environmental Engineer
National Rural Water Association

Jenny Bielanski

Drinking Water Utilities Team Leader
EPA Office of Ground Water and
Drinking Water

Rodney Coker

Tribal Utility Consultant (Retired)
Indian Health Service

Mark Coyne

Associate Professor
University of Kentucky

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eTRAIN ONLINE, Inc.

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Huntington Beach, CA

Lori B. Libby

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and Regional Affairs
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President
Ralston Hydrologic Services
Moscow, ID

Lisa Raysby Hardcastle, P.E.

Contractor, VERSAR, Inc
Fort Lewis Public Works
Fort Lewis, Washington

Jay Rutherford, P.E.

Water Supply Division Director
Vermont Department of
Environmental Conservation

Q: What are some good ways for the U.S. to fund needed improvements to our aging infrastructure?





Using Public Funds Wisely

Unfortunately, I have direct knowledge and experience with aging infrastructure for private, public (i.e., municipal), and federal water and wastewater systems. Funding for infrastructure appears to be more readily available for growth, particularly if folks stick with the concept that growth should pay for growth. I have seen and put to use federal funding directed to Washington State under the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). However, these funds were only available to public water systems.

First, I must stress that I am neither an economic major nor a financial guru. I am a pretty good American consumer of goods and services. That said, I believe it would have made more sense to stimulate the economy by spending federal funds on construction projects in the U.S., rather than handing out stimulus checks. (Please note that I am not talking about tax rebates that should be based on income.)

These funds could have been directed not only to aging water and wastewater infrastructure, but also aging transportation infrastructure or even environmentally, commuter-friendly mass transit projects. The federal government needs to begin with funding their own failing aging infrastructure to not only stimulate the economy, but increase human welfare and safety, and protect the environment.



A Never-Ending Task

Over the years, agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have funded billions of dollars in water and wastewater projects. The temptation is to think that more money will somehow magically solve our infrastructure woes. But, we have so much infrastructure in the ground and it is aging at a rate that is faster than what we can easily replace or rebuild.

I'm reminded of the work crews that paint the Golden Gate Bridge. By the time they get to one end, they have to go back and start at the other end and do it all over again, because the paint has started to wear off. Perhaps we need to put more efforts into making sure we are using what we already have to the very best of its ability to be used. Optimizing the performance of existing facilities is critical to this process. And then being very analytical in the methodologies used for identifying what infrastructure really needs replacing so that we direct our funding to the areas that really need it the most.



Buried and Forgotten

The real problem with aging water and wastewater infrastructure is that people just are not paying what it takes to keep a water system up and running. Everyone thinks that once it is in the ground, it is done and can be forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind. There are a lot of ideas about funding mechanisms, such as drinking water surtaxes similar to the federal highway funds. But most small systems are not crazy about such an idea, because it is another tax that may yield no benefit. The only real solution is to raise the rates on water to a level that replacement of needed infrastructure can be made on a regular basis. However, this is a tough sell with the voting public.