



Gilby, N.D., Farmer Honored for His Work Promoting Rural Water

By Ann Bailey, *Grand Forks Herald*

John Hancock doesn't take water for granted.

The 82-year-old Gilby farmer recalls all too vividly the 25 years he spent hauling water from Inkster to his farm northwest of Gilby. It was a 10-mile round trip that he or his wife made at least twice monthly, spring, winter, summer, and fall, with their single-axle 1952 Studebaker farm truck loaded with a 1,500 gallon-capacity tank.

When the Agassiz Water Users District was formed in 1972 to pipe water from the Inkster aquifer to farms like his, Hancock was delighted to become a part of it. Not only did Hancock hook up his farm to the water system, he became a voice for rural water, spending the next 47 years advocating for systems like Agassiz Water Users.

Hancock served on the Agassiz Water Users District Board of Directors for 43 years and, for many years, on the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association's executive board. Hancock has been a supporter of many state water programs and for projects and initiatives providing safe drinking water for communities and rural areas, said Joe LaFave, North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association's treasurer.

Hancock is well-known for his work with rural water issues, LaFave said.

"I can't think of anybody in the state of North Dakota who doesn't know John," he said. "He's one of the best."

Hancock, now president of the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association's executive board, recently was commissioned by the North Dakota Water Users Association as a Commodore in the North Dakota Mythical Navy.

The award was presented to Hancock during the annual Joint North Dakota Water Convention and Irrigation Workshop held in December in Bismarck. Former North Dakota Gov. William Guy founded the award to honor leaders who have proven a commitment to protect, develop and manage North Dakota's water resources, according to the North Dakota Water Users Association.

For Hancock, advocating for rural water systems is a way to give back to his community.

Before his farm was hooked to Agassiz Water Users, he and his family conserved their water use, taking short showers and even tracking how many times they flushed the toilet.



John Hancock

Another inconvenience was dumping the tankload of water on the truck into the cistern, especially on cold winter days.

"That was a miserable job," Hancock said.

He calls hooking up his farm to Agassiz Water Users a "godsend."

"I compare it with the first time we got electricity here," Hancock said. "It was a luxury. It was something that changed our lives for the better."

During the first year after Agassiz Water Users formed, the system pumped water directly out of the aquifer and piped it to customers' homes. The next year, a treatment plant was built which follows Environmental Protection Agency guidelines for safe drinking water, said Hancock, who expanded his knowledge of water safety issues by attending annual board-sponsored workshops and is a supporter of issues relating to water quality.

"John is very promotional of that," LaFave said.

Forty-five years after rural water came to his farm, Hancock still smiles when he talks about the positive changes it made to his family farm.

"It was something that changed our lives for the better. I'm a firm believer in the rural water program," he said.

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Water Workforce Needed

By Bailey Elkins, Workforce Development Specialist

More than half of the nation's rural water workforce will leave the water industry within the next 10 years. Rural water and wastewater utilities need a pipeline of skilled workers to help ensure clean and safe water for the public, and to maintain the water infrastructure necessary to keep rural service areas economically viable. North Dakota Rural Water has partnered with the Department of Labor and the National Rural Water Association to develop an apprenticeship program to help build that pipeline.

Water and wastewater systems operations specialists are vital to communities for access to clean drinking water and to ensure wastewater effluent is returned to the environment properly.

A vast majority of rural and small community water systems have been unable to attract, train and retain the next generation workforce.

As rural communities are facing a workforce shortage, water operations specialists are facing advancements in water treatment and supply technology, which have increased the skills and training required. Water professionals are ultimately responsible for meeting stringent regulatory standards, replacing aging infrastructure, recruiting and training new operations specialists, and responding to and recovering from disasters.

Learn While You Earn

From their first day of work, apprentices receive a paycheck that is guaranteed to increase as their training progresses. Apprentices also complete a combination of job-related instruction and hands-on training leading to a nationally recognized, portable credential. Once the apprenticeship is complete, apprentices are well on their way to a successful long-term career with a competitive salary.

Apprenticeship offers many benefits to both future operators and utilities. The apprentice gets full-time employment from an established system that offers on-the-job learning. This apprentice learns about the water system

that employs them, picking up critical knowledge about the system's assets.

The apprentice also gets the chance to learn from a mentor, an operator already licensed and with experience in the field. This mentor can offer helpful information on how to advance within the industry. Apprentices receive technical instruction in addition to their on-the-job learning. This instruction helps to strengthen and round out the knowledge base of the apprentice, making them a more valuable employee.

Individuals interested in a career in the drinking water industry are encouraged to contact North Dakota Rural Water Systems for more information about enrolling in the apprenticeship program.

