

Appendix F: Rural and Small Water System Self-Assessment for Capacity Development



Minnesota Rural Water Association
217 12th Avenue SE
Elbow Lake, MN 56531
Phone: 800-367-6792
Fax: 218-685-5272
www.mrwa.com
E-mail: mrwa@mrwa.com

Information for Capacity Development Questionnaire

Every water system in this nation should have the managerial, financial and technical capacity to comply with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. Good management and good operations cannot be regulated into existence, people make them happen. Thus, every Board member, council member, owner, and manager needs to know certain critical aspects of their water system and how they affect its operations. To this end, the Minnesota Rural Water Association has developed a self-assessment tool for water systems that will identify the critical areas and focus on improvements that could be made in their operations. This instrument is intended to be used in two ways:

In a public water system board or council meeting

By a private water system's owner

Its purpose is to inform owners or board or council members of their existing managerial, financial and technical capacity and areas that may be strengthened. It is important to stress that this assessment is to be conducted by the water system. It is solely the choice of the water system whether this assessment is to be shared with any regulatory agency.

Special consideration was given to the very small privately owned systems. Some questions will be difficult for such entities to answer. However, regardless of the size of system, Rural Water field staff will be available to assist in both administering this instrument and in improving any area.

A lengthy process involving several hundred rural water field staff, water managers, operators and board members developed this questionnaire. For each of the three areas of capacity development, participants were asked the top ten indicators of sufficient capacity for that area. These results were compiled and evaluated by a National Rural Water Association (NRWA) committee. The committee also reviewed capacity development instruments from several states and their Finance Centers. The questionnaire was then reviewed by a distinguished group of field staff and field tested in four states.

A successful business must be capable of dealing with any change that occurs in its environment. Some of these changes may be perceived as threats or opportunities. Regardless, having the appropriate financial, managerial and technical resources at your disposal allows every threat to become an opportunity. Extending your facilities to add customers, reacting to the impact of new Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) regulations or a host of other issues may require new financing. Losing customers to an adjoining urban area dramatically impacts a water system. All of these situations can be opportunities with sound business planning that will come through completing this document.

The following discussion shows the importance of each question.

Remember, if you have any difficulty with any of these questions or need further examples of any of these items, please call the Minnesota Rural Water Association.



Financial

Very simply stated, water systems provide water to homes and businesses and receive money for it. When the bottom line is positive-- that is you get more money in than you send out-- you get to stay in business. When the bottom line is negative-- that is when you send out more money than you take in--you will not be in business long. Budgeting is an important part of the process allowing projections of the expected income and expenses for the upcoming year. This will show if sufficient funds will be available to pay the bills. The budget should be written and reviewed with the financial statements.

If your assets (the value of all your money and property) are greater than your liabilities (the value of all you owe), your water system is solvent. The more assets exceed liabilities, the more funds that can be put aside for replacing equipment and future construction. In the event liabilities exceed assets, you should have a plan that will quickly correct the problem. To do otherwise may result in bills being unpaid and eventually bankruptcy. Your last audit is a good place to find these numbers because it is based on the accrual accounting method. This is the established method of determining your true financial picture.

A long-range financial plan establishes financial goals and is a roadmap detailing how your water system will remain financially healthy and achieve these financial goals.

Having reserves and properly accounting for depreciation are fundamental to keeping your water system healthy. Often reserves are designated for future projects. Funding depreciation is a method of setting aside funds to replace equipment or facilities.

A capital improvement plan details how funds will be used to replace items as they wear out and when new items will be purchased to upgrade the system.

There are many necessary controls that insure the financial integrity of your water system. Having monthly financial statements will assist in managing activities. Having them reviewed by the governing board, council or owner is also important, because they have a fiduciary responsibility for their water system. Most public water systems are required to undergo some type of audit. This audit will show the accuracy of the monthly financial reports. Written financial policies assure that matters are dealt with in a consistent fashion. Reviewing the financial reports will show when it is time to review the rate structure.

Your rate structure should produce enough income to cover your current expenses, replacement costs for existing equipment and structures, produce sufficient reserves and meet all your contractual obligations. If it does not, it should be adjusted immediately.

It should be reviewed on an annual basis to determine if it is sufficient for the upcoming year.

All your contractual obligations must be met. Otherwise you will not be considered financially sound.



Management

The ownership or governance structure of your water system dictates the legal obligations that must be followed. You should be aware of your responsibilities as an owner, a council member or board member, as they are all different.

For municipalities and non-profit organizations, it is important that the by-laws and covenants affecting the entity be kept up to date and changed when necessary. They should be dated with the last time they were changed.

Public entities are often required to meet on a regular basis. Minutes of these meetings are usually required.

Public entities are typically required to have an annual budget presented and approved by the governance.

All water systems are required to have an IRS ID number.

Water systems should have written operational policies. This insures that customers are treated equally and does much to avoid lawsuits. Policies should be kept up to date reflecting actions of the governance body and changes in state and federal laws.

The person in charge of the water system should be clearly defined. If more than one person is employed, there should be a staffing chart or communications chart. There should also be written, up to date, personnel policies. These insure that every employee is treated consistently and fairly.

There are over forty federal agencies that are involved in some aspect of water. Remaining in compliance with all these federal and state regulations is important yet often complex.

Technical

Your water source can be surface, ground, purchased water or any combination of the three. Each of these sources has different requirements you must be aware of.

Example, in the western states, you must have sufficient and secure water rights.

Good planning requires that you continually evaluate your source to determine if it is adequate to deliver the amount of water required not only for the present but also into the future.

A source water or groundwater/wellhead protection plan is a good idea. Land uses in the area supplying water for a public water system can, and do, impact water quality. Increasingly, more and more water systems are taking steps to protect their water source by planning, ordinances and other land use controls.

All water systems must meet the requirements of the SDWA and other such standards set by your state.

All water systems should have clearly defined service areas. Some states certify service areas and others do not.

Plans for operations and maintenance are recommended to prevent problems of memory and employee turnover.

All certification requirements imposed by the state and county governments must be met.



The majority of water systems in this state belong to the Minnesota Rural Water Association for very obvious reasons. They offer help when you need it. Training on a variety of subjects and technical assistance at your doorstep are but two important reasons to be a part of this organization.

Keeping your water loss at a very low level is a well-recognized method of keeping costs down. Your water loss should be below 15 percent.

For water systems with a limited source or that purchase water, a conservation plan insures that this limited product is used to its greatest benefit. For systems that serve more than 1,000 persons a Water Conservation and Emergency Plan must be submitted to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Accurate maps are a necessity for all well run systems. Relying on human memory is not efficient and only lasts one generation.

All operators must have the level of certification required for their system. In addition to certification, operators should attend training to assist them in maintaining their skills at their highest level. Water operators are encouraged to increase their certification level to the highest class you can be.

This will prepare you in the event a major redesign of your facility is done and that improvement increases your system classification. Minnesota Rural Water Association training sessions are an excellent source of information and a method of staying current.



Emergency plans are needed! Planning for all contingencies allows vital water service to be continued during a time of crisis.

Facility service manuals are another method of insuring that water systems continue to operate properly even with a change of personnel.

A sanitary survey is an onsite review by the Minnesota Department of Health of the water source, and the facilities, equipment, operation, and maintenance of a public water system. A sanitary survey is meant to identify problems, which may affect the safety of the water. The survey is based on a physical inspection of the water system and how the system is operated and maintained.

Violations of the SDWA are serious and should be corrected immediately. Last year less than ten percent of the water systems exceeded a maximum contaminant level or an action level. Most violations are for monitoring and sampling. While these violations are not as serious as exceeding a contaminant level, they should be promptly corrected. Steps should be taken to insure that this type of incident is prevented.

Safety programs are designed to protect employees and the public. Water systems have many potentially dangerous situations that can be eliminated with a little planning.

It is the responsibility of every water system to offer quality service and be responsive to customer needs. To do otherwise is to invite trouble.

The following questionnaire will allow you to focus on several critical aspects of the operation of your water system. We hope some of these questions will be thought provoking and challenging. If you have found that additional information is needed to answer all the questions, or you need assistance in understanding some of the suggestions offered, please call the Minnesota Rural Water Association.

Water systems must strive to improve every aspect of their operations. By using this questionnaire on an annual basis, your water system can see the changes that have been made and how the improvements have brought better water, better service and better prices to your customers.

Self-Assessment for Capacity Development

Background:

The Safe Drinking Water Act requires new public water supply systems or systems applying for state revolving loan funds to demonstrate certain capabilities. Those water systems must have the technical, managerial and financial capability to meet present and foreseeable regulations, provide adequate water service and operate as financially viable entities. This responsibility is referred to as "Capacity Development."

The Minnesota Rural Water Association feels it's important that all public water systems have appropriate technical, financial and managerial capacities. However, we feel it is essential that smaller public water supply systems recognize that their systems are most vulnerable in their ability to demonstrate Capacity Development.

The following self-assessment provides your public water system with the opportunity to review and assess the various areas that are generally considered as critical, basic components in achieving and maintaining Capacity Development. We encourage you to complete this assessment to demonstrate that your system is prepared to meet its present and future obligations as a viable public water system. We also encourage you to complete this assessment on an annual basis since changes occur very rapidly on water systems. A few of the following questions may not be applicable to your system depending on its ownership type. In those cases, it is appropriate to ignore those questions. The Minnesota Rural Water Association is ready to assist you in preparing and meeting these new challenges. Your professionalism and commitment will help rural water be the leader of the new millennium.

System name: _____

Type of system ownership (municipal, districts, homeowner association, co-op, etc.)

Is system a for-profit or non-profit? _____

Formed under what statute? _____

Name of person in charge (Owner, Manager, President) _____

Address _____

Phone number _____

Number of connections _____ Population served _____

Financial

Are you on target with budgeted income and expenses? Yes No

From last audit are current total assets greater than your liabilities? Yes No

If not, do you have a plan to change the situation? Yes No

Do you have a long-range financial plan? Yes No

Are you following it? Yes No

Do you adequately fund depreciation or have other reserves? Yes No

Do you have a capital improvement plan?	Yes	No
Financial controls (check all boxes that apply)		
Monthly financial statements	Yes	No
Monthly review of financial statements by board, council or owner	Yes	No
Annual audit	Yes	No
Written financial policies	Yes	No
Do you review your rate structure annually?	Yes	No
Does your current rate structure produce income to cover:		
Current expenses	Yes	No
Replacement costs	Yes	No
Reserves	Yes	No
Are all contractual obligations being met?	Yes	No

Management

Indicate your governance structure (i.e. elected board, council, appointed, sole ownership, etc.)

Are by-laws, resolutions, ordinances and/or covenants up-to-date, if applicable?	Yes	No
Date of last review? _____		
Does governing body meet on a regular basis?	Yes	No
Are minutes of meetings available?	Yes	No
Is an annual budget prepared and reviewed at board or council meetings?	Yes	No
Do you have a federal ID number from the IRS?	Yes	No
Do you have written operational policies (i.e. connection, cut-off, payments, etc.)?	Yes	No
Are policies up-to-date?	Yes	No
Is the person in charge clearly defined?	Yes	No
If applicable, is there a staffing chart (organizational chart)?	Yes	No
Are there written personnel policies?	Yes	No
Are they up-to-date?	Yes	No

Is system in compliance with all state and federal laws? Yes No

Technical

What is your water source? Surface _____ Ground _____ Purchased _____

Are water rights sufficient and secured? (For Western states) Yes No

Do you have a source water protection plan? Yes No

If purchased, does your supplier have a source water protection plan? Yes No

Is the quantity of water available from your water source adequate for the next five years? Yes No

Does your source meet or exceed SDWA standards? Yes No

Does or will it meet standards without extensive treatment? Yes No

If not, are you aware of:

What treatment is or will be required? Yes No

Treatment costs? Yes No

Operator skills required? Yes No

Likely contaminates that may affect your system in the future? Yes No

Is your service area clearly defined? Yes No

Does your system have a plan for operations and maintenance?
(Examples: line flushing and storage tank maintenance) Yes No

Have all the certification requirements for operations been met? Yes No

Is your operator certified? Yes No

Is the system aware of the benefits of industry related service organizations such as the Minnesota Rural Water Association. Yes No

Does the system calculate and control water loss? Yes No

Does your system have a conservation plan? Yes No

Does your system have accurate maps of distribution system? Yes No

Do your operators have the appropriate level of certification? Yes No

Do your system personnel attend appropriate and current training sessions? Yes No

Is your system required to have an approved emergency plan? If so, give date of last review: _____	Yes	No
Does your system have and use facility service manuals?	Yes	No
Have you corrected the deficiencies noted on your last sanitary survey?	Yes	No
Has your system had a violation of the SDWA in the last year?	Yes	No
Does your system periodically review safety programs? (i.e. OSHA requirements, etc.)	Yes	No
Does your system strive for quality service and to be responsive to customers needs?	Yes	No

If you had difficulty answering any question or answered "no" to any of these questions, we encourage you to contact us. Your water system should set up a strategy to resolve all issues that could not be answered positively. The attached information addresses some of the critical issues raised on this questionnaire. The Minnesota Rural Water Association is committed to providing the technical assistance and resources that can assist with your system's Capacity Development. For more information contact Minnesota Rural Water Association at 800-367-6792.

**Copyrighted by the National Rural Water Association
for use by NRWA state associations.
2915 South 13th, Duncan, Oklahoma 73533
580-252-0629
E-mail: nrwa.org**