

The #CleanWaterMovement Takes Hold in Bowling Green

Bowling Green Municipal Utility reaps the benefits of signing on as CWP's first Clean Water Partner



Doug Kimbler, BGMU
Treatment Plants
Superintendent

Doug Kimbler is very aware that change is hard, especially when it comes to shifting the way people think. The Bowling Green Municipal Utilities (BGMU) Treatment Plants Superintendent knew when they signed on as one of the first Clean Water Partners with the Clean Water Professionals of Kentucky and Tennessee (CWP-KT), it would be a long process to incite change. Change in a field that had, what he thought, been very set in their ways for quite some time.

Doug sat down with CWP to share BGMU's transformation thus far, and how the process has opened his eyes to how very important the #cleanwatermovement really is to the water environment sector.

WHEN DID BOWLING GREEN COME ON AS A CLEAN WATER PARTNER?

Bowling Green became a Clean Water Partner in summer 2019. Mike Gardner, Systems Manager for the Water & Wastewater Division, and I felt very strongly about moving forward with the partnership, and the best way to do that would be to go in at the ground level. We also knew that would be the best way to educate our own facility – from the bottom up.

HOW DID YOU START THE PROCESS OF "CLEAN WATER" EDUCATION?

Mike and I began our careers at the Wastewater Treatment Plant (now called the Water Recovery Facility), so it's always been near and dear to our hearts. Even though we are now at different locations within our division, we still wanted to start the clean water program education rollout at the plant.

As a treatment plant team member, you sometimes feel a little like the ugly sibling at the party that never gets asked to dance. It's important to showcase the good work these employees are doing, but we also felt like they would be the most critical to a clean water mindset change. Buy-in from this group was crucial. If we couldn't get that, we couldn't move forward. And as expected, our team immediately accepted and participated in the changeover. After several months of communication, we have made definitive progress towards a clean water culture shift.



Not only have most adopted the new "clean water" language, but even the inside jokes have faded away. I knew we had turned a corner when I overheard a phone call answered as "Water Recovery Facility" by an individual several weeks after our kick-off meeting. I knew at that point the message had been taken to heart. We had made it, at least from an internal standpoint.

WHAT CHANGES HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED AND HOW ARE THEY WORKING?

In addition to our employee education, we are slowly rebranding internally by changing our facility names. The first physical name we tackled was the Sewage Treatment Plant #2, which was on our Kentucky Pollution Discharge Elimination System (KPDES) permit. Since we were in the permit renewal process, it was easy to request that our plant name be changed to the Bowling Green Municipal Utilities Water Recovery Facility, or BGMU WRF. It's much more descriptive of the work we actually do. We recover a valuable resource and return it to the environment.

HOW HAS THE REST OF YOUR ORGANIZATION ACCLIMATED?

We are seeing our senior operators leading the charge in the Clean Water Movement. In the past, if our seasoned employees did not accept change, that would dictate a negative pace and new initiatives would stall. This clean water partnership has been accepted wholeheartedly. Even our chemists have jumped on board, being certified for the BGMU Water Recovery Facility.

HAS ANY EXTERNAL BRANDING AND EDUCATION STARTED?

We have started the process. The thing is, it's not easy to do. You can't turn this titanic on a dime or a \$20 bill. It's time-intensive to change permits and legal documents. How do we move that forward? It's a labor of love. It's not as easy as calling the city and just editing titles. But we knew that going in! We know that it is a long-term effort that will take a lot of time to do – to bring it around. And that's okay! We want to do it right.

HOW HAS IT BEEN ACCEPTED?

Internally, we have had some pushback. That pushback has been focused on how the public will receive this change, and will there be confusion over "clean water" versus "water" or "potable water." Outside of our organization, we've had people ask, why change now? You've been this way for a long time. This just tells me it's time to change. While internal acceptance has been relatively easy, our focus has to be on external acceptance from the general public as well. I think getting the general public to understand and accept this change will be a challenge, but one that is worth pursuing. So the next obvious point is, how do you convince them? Our job is to educate them about the long-term positive impact for our community and in our sector from a public health recognition standpoint. We're starting to do that by scheduling business presentations and community outreach to explain our new direction. We've been a hidden utility. It's now time to bring a positive light about what we really do.

WHAT CLEAN WATER COLLATERAL HAVE YOU USED?

It has been shared with our internal team, but not with the general public yet. The infographic has helped tremendously to make sense of why the clean water movement is so important.

We haven't used all of the materials yet, but for me, letting the people who are affected the most have control over sharing these new pieces is key. An organic process has been the best way for us. We want to be known as the utility that is on the leading edge, and we are excited to continue with that challenge.

WHAT MARKETING HAS WORKED BEST?

Organic marketing is definitely working, and critical buy-in and positive feedback from our operators has helped tremendously as well. Our next challenge is legal and changing it permanently in our city ordinances. It's just a lengthy process. The faster we get started, the faster we can get the public accustomed to the change.

WHAT CONVINCED YOU TO TAKE A CHANCE AND MOVE FORWARD AS A PARTNER WITH CWP?

We have to give a lot of credit to Valerie Lucas to seeing beyond the ordinary to the impossible, and the Ad-Hoc Committee that helped propel the Clean Water Movement forward. These individuals took on something that could be very ill-received. They took it and believed in enough to move forward. We will finally have the opportunity to recognize the work that has been done to make this happen. It's been so much more than just changing the association's name. The work that has been done has been dynamite.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE WITH OTHERS THAT ARE THINKING ABOUT BECOMING CLEAN WATER PARTNERS?

It's never going to be an overnight process. You will accomplish less in a year than you wanted, but in five years you'll be blown away by how much has been achieved. It's going to be that way for many utilities – the first year is hard, but give it time and we'll see how far we've come. The more partners we get on board, the better. People want to go where positive change is happening, and it's happening with the Clean Water Professionals of Kentucky and Tennessee through the [#cleanwatermovement](#). ■

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