

# The Value of Conferences



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This month's issue looks back at April's Florida Water Resource Conference (FWRC) that was held in Daytona Beach. I always enjoy these reflections on the success of our professional conferences and it always takes me back to my first experiences at FWRC.

I was hired by St. Johns County as a water treatment trainee back in 1985. I was fortunate to have a boss who was active in professional associations and encouraged his employees to attend the conference. I can still remember my disbelief and excitement when

I was told I would be paid to attend and even be put up in a nearby hotel. Since the 1980s, I have probably attended 90 percent of our annual FWRCs, and to be honest, I still feel very fortunate to attend. When I became utility director in 1998, I continued to encourage our younger professionals to attend, and benefit, from FWRC as well.

After a long and successful history of joint, and collaborative, conferences with FWEA and FWPCOA, the Florida Section of AWWA decided to start its own separate conference in 1995. That first section event had 100 attendees and now hosts over 1,300. The conference is always scheduled for the fall so as not to compete with FWRC, which we continue to fully support. It's obvious that in a fast-growing state like Florida, our profession can support these two conferences, and it's my belief that they actually complement each other.

## Why attend conferences?

In my 30 years of attending these two conferences, I have met many water professionals and made many good friends. These professionals could be other utility employees, environmental or management consultants, equipment representatives, or industry regulators. Obviously, these contacts offer significant opportunities to expand my knowledge, improve my utility, or just gain a better understanding of other perspectives. At the very least, it's always good to meet new people and share an experience, or a laugh. There is no doubt that networking offers significant value and opportunities to both individuals and organizations alike.

Another advantage to attending conferences is the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of others. For me it was attending a section luncheon and hearing all the great



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things that they did for students, young professionals, and successful plant operators. Similarly, FWEA and FWPCOA also raise funds to do positive things. By attending conferences you can easily approach a volunteer to find out how you can become involved. Be assured that every professional organization is looking for people like you!

As a young water plant operator I loved to walk the exhibit hall and learn about all the latest equipment and technology. I was excited to bring these discoveries back to our treatment facility and apply them to our operation. Today's conferences provide many more options for improvement at your utility and the exhibit halls are always abuzz with activity. And truthfully, it's these exhibitors and the products and services they showcase that provides the financial foundation for the success of our conferences. The interaction between attendees and exhibitors is a significant value, to both parties, that only a professional and in-person conference can provide.

Another important benefit to conference attendees is the multitude of technical sessions and workshops that can greatly enhance your professional knowledge. Often presented by the people "in the trenches," I have always found these sessions both timely and invaluable.

Over the past few years, conferences have offered even more options for attendees. The Annual State Drinking Water Contest, Top Ops, Backhoe Rodeo, and many other fun, but very competitive, events have attracted more and more fans every year!

I should mention that much of the business of our professional organizations is also held at our conferences. In addition to board meetings, all of the various councils and committees meet to discuss goals and objectives for the months ahead (again, an excellent opportunity to get involved).

No matter where you are in your career, please try to attend FWRC in the future and the section's Fall Conference later this year. I am certain you will not regret it.

See you in November!      ♡

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