When I try to imagine what it would be like without the hard work of Florida’s water professionals in bringing safe, reliable water to every household and business in this state, I think of Bolivia, where 25 percent of the population does not have access to improved water sources. Many people there struggle each day to find enough water of any quality, and as a result, they suffer from illness and poverty. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 663 million people rely on unimproved water sources susceptible to contamination for their drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene.

When you compare these areas to Florida, it’s evident to me that the economic value of safe, convenient, and reliable water is enormous. It’s been estimated by WHO that every dollar invested in water and sanitation in areas that lack these basic services provides a four-dollar economic return from improved health and increased productivity.

Water is indispensable to households, and to commercial and industrial production. Without water, we would lose our health, our income, and our high quality of life. Florida’s value of goods and services totaled $883 billion in 2015. Without Florida’s water utilities, this value would dry up. This is why it’s difficult to put a total dollar value on this water because the value is so huge. Fortunately, in Florida we don’t have to put a dollar value on this water because we are able to provide this basic and critical service at an affordable price.

But once we get beyond what is needed for public health and economic prosperity, the value of this additional water is lower and can be reasonably estimated. Water for taking long showers, running baths, filling swimming pools, washing cars, and irrigating lawns can be used more efficiently and be better managed—especially in response to increased water prices and supply shortages. Water can be reused, leaks can be repaired, water-efficient technologies can be installed, and water waste eliminated.

The value of this water can be estimated using the large number of water demand studies produced in Florida and throughout the United States. This value follows two tenets of economic theory: first, each additional unit of water you use has less and less value to you; and second, you will stop using water when your value of that last unit is lower than the water and sewer rate. As a result, your value of water is more than what you paid for it.

While average water use and the value of this water differ from one local area to the next, an overall estimate for Florida is provided here as an example.

Florida’s average household water use is roughly 340 gallons per household per day, and about 220 of these are beyond what is needed for drinking, cooking, and sanitation. The 220 gallons equates to 80,300 gallons per year. We know from water demand studies that the value of this water to the household is on average about $1,600. This means that households would be willing to pay that amount per year in order to continue using the 220 gallons of water every day.

When you consider that about five million households in Florida obtain their water from utilities, the total value of this water is $8.2 billion per year, and only about one-half of this amount is actually paid to a utility for water and sewer service. In fact, most of us spend well below 4 percent of our income on utility-provided water and sewer service in Florida, and yet it is responsible for the lion’s share of our health, our livelihood, and our wellbeing.

So, while our elected leaders balk at raising water and sewer rates to pay for replacing our aging water and sewer infrastructure, develop new water sources, and invest in technologies to clean our water, remember that at the end of the day, everyone still wants safe, sufficient, and reliable water, and they are willing to pay for it. For our part, we must strive to provide this service in the most cost-efficient way possible.

Now, how do we as members of the Florida Section AWWA support this value? We proudly serve more than 2,400 members, and each year we provide more than 110 training, outreach, and networking events that help our water professionals do their job. That’s more than two events held somewhere every week of the year, at least one of which is a training event. In addition, each year we produce not one but two conferences: the FSAWWA Fall Conference, produced by our Manufacturers/Associates Council; and the Florida Water Resources Conference, which is a joint conference with FWEA and FWPCOA. We are also a technical co-sponsor of the annual ISA Water/Wastewater and Automatic Controls Symposium, and in 2015, we co-hosted the Caribbean Water and Wastewater Conference and Exhibition in Miami.

Our workhorse is our 12 regions that are the heart and soul of our organization, providing most of this training, fundraising, public outreach, and networking, and we should continue to support them in all that they do. These activities include: our highly successful and award-winning annual model water tower competition for grade-school children; our popular annual best tasting drinking water contest, which gives us good local news coverage and reminds our communities that we are here to serve them; and our fundraising, which has raised more than $60,000 each year for Water For People and provided more than $25,000 per year in scholarships.

Our Utility Council has a long history of successfully communicating the needs of our utilities to our representatives at the state and federal levels as they make important legislative decisions that impact water supply and funding. Each year, our section participates in the Tallahassee Fly-In and the Washington D.C. Fly-In.

Since 2008, our members have been active in moving forward our Florida 2040 goals to make sure that we have sufficient and sustainable water supply infrastructure for all water uses and needs, including natural systems. We coordinate our efforts through our annual water summit, and last year’s FL2040 Water Summit was a huge success.

Our Public Affairs Council leads the section’s model water tower competition and our annual statewide drop savings water conservation poster competition, also for grade-school children. Our Administrative Council is responsible for bestowing our numerous professional awards and administering our Likins Scholarship and Water For People funds. Our Technical and Education Council leads the creation and quality control of our training events. Our Contractors Council works to better manage Florida’s infrastructure needs, while balancing these needs with our natural resources. The Operators and Maintenance Council works to increase member services to water plant and distribution system operators, and water supply maintenance staff.

These are just some of the many groups of the Florida Section AWWA, and I plan to highlight them and their members—and many more—in upcoming columns. These activities are impressive and are a testament to the hard work of hundreds of Florida Section members and our section staff who are making “A Better World Through Better Water” happen, day in and day out.

I want to recognize the hard work of our past and current members and leaders and the generosity of our past and current sponsors who have allowed us to be a financially and professionally strong organization. I also invite FSAWWA members and water professionals to reach out to our regions and councils for assistance and to volunteer.

Together we are much stronger and smarter than we are individually. I am very excited to serve this large, diverse, and talented group of water professionals as chair of the Florida Section AWWA, and I will work very hard to make 2017 our best year yet.