It has been a challenging month for water and wastewater utilities. A couple of noteworthy incidents come to mind, namely the Mosaic sinkhole and the St. Petersburg flooding and sewer system overflows, which began the process that resulted in the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Emergency Rule 62ER 16-01. The confusion for water and wastewater facilities, as well as all other regulated entities on what to do to comply and when we are expected to act to inform the public, caused a flurry of communications between and among utilities through our utility councils. Just as we were starting to get some more information and direction from FDEP through its website and follow-up workshops for future rulemaking were scheduled, our focus shifted to the Atlantic and Hurricane Matthew.

Our perspective quickly changed to preparing our families, our homes, and our facilities for a very powerful storm. As I write this column, our friends in the eastern portions of the state are still suffering from power outages and the destruction of roads and infrastructure, which their communities need to function. Power outages continue and the death toll continues to increase. The FDEP emergency rule is still in place, but the immediate priorities changed to protection of infrastructure and being able to pump and treat water and wastewater if we lost power. Fuel, chemical, and other supply items that we take for granted were delayed because roads were unsafe and the winds unpredictable, and the ports were closed due to weather.

The common factor with these recent events is that the utility and water community pulls together to keep each other informed, prepare for the worst, and prepare for recovery as soon as possible. After the three hurricanes that central Florida received in 2004 we learned a lot about how to prepare, what was expected through the event, and what to expect afterwards. Preparation helps, but we all have to deal with the reality when it happens—and the devastation, rebuilding, and paperwork afterwards. We probably didn’t learn enough about how to properly fill out the reports to facilitate repayment from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but after Matthew, I am sure we will learn more and be better prepared the next time.

I am sure many of you watched as the store shelves emptied and the gas stations closed shortly after that. We stock up, we hunker down, and many of our customers still worry that they will not have safe drinking water or the ability to flush their toilets, as we at the utilities strive to keep them in water and wastewater coverage through the storm and after the storm. But, our preparations pay off and we get back to normal as soon as we can, many times with help from our friends in the industry through FlaWARN, the Florida Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network, which is the formalized system of “utilities helping utilities” to address mutual aid during emergency situations.

As soon as the storm passes, the same day-to-day customer complaints come in and we are back to the old perspectives: not whether they will have water and wastewater, but is it pristine enough and reliable enough. And then we at the utilities are once again taken for granted.

I guess we don’t work in this industry to expect pats on the back and appreciation from others; we do it because we find some satisfaction in doing a good job to provide what our customers take for granted. During Matthew, as I worked at our operations center through the night, I was impressed by the professionals that I am fortunate to work with every day—the staff that volunteered to work through the storm and could hardly wait to come in the next day to do the damage assessments, and their families that let them go and understand why they need to go. Each time, we have to hold them back and wait until it is safe to get back on the roads. They want to start again and bring us back to some sort of normalcy.

So with that in mind, let’s change perspectives and priorities once again. Please go on the FDEP website (www.dep.state.fl.us/pollution-notice/Emergency-Rule-FAQs.pdf) and get more information on the emergency rule and the newest information as rulemaking continues. Stay connected via FSAWWA’s website under the utility council tab at www.fsawwa.org. Stay connected with other operators and maintenance personnel through the Operators and Maintenance Council. And come to the FSAWWA Fall Conference on November 28 through December 1 and get the most current information about emergency planning and operations, and so much more; you can register at http://www.fsawwa.org/page/2016Homepage.

And thank your colleagues who work in this industry—in good weather and in bad—for their hard work and dedication.

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