We have reached the end of 2021, so this is my last column as FSAWWA chair. I want to thank the past chairs and Executive Committee (EC) members who believed I could uphold their legacy in this position. Thank you all for your trust. I believe we have continued to build on our FSAWWA organization, and the future remains bright.

The year has gone by so fast, and behind the scenes, a lot has been happening. This was a year of reopening and adjusting to the “new normal,” as I outlined last month in my column. It was also a year to put the infrastructure in place to restart the Florida Water Resource Conference (FWRC) with new leadership. The 2022 FWRC in Daytona Beach will be here before you know it.

Section Staff and Executive Committee Officers Kudos

A huge thank you to Peggy Guingona, the section’s executive director, and the staff at FSAWWA headquarters for all the hard work they do. If you don’t know Jenny, Casey, and Donna, you need to! The team is fantastic and the section has grown and runs smoothly because of their efforts. They make being chair way too easy!

We also have great EC officers. Emilie Moore, Greg Taylor, and past chair Kim Kowalski have been part of weekly meetings where the issues that need our attention are discussed and recommendations made. Most of those discussions are summarized and reported at our two section meetings each year, one of which is at the FSAWWA Fall Conference.

Thanks to the EC members for all of your guidance and participation as we have navigated the issues of the day: COVID, office and school re-openings, conference issues, FWRC, awards, scholarships, and more.

We held the past chairs meeting this year. It was good to see and talk with the past chairs and gain their insight on the section. It has come a long way in 20 years.

Section Fall Conference

As you are reading this, our annual conference is complete. I’m hopeful everyone had a good time and learned a lot. Thank you to all who sent in abstracts for the technical program, and I’m sorry we could only take half of them; there was so much good information submitted. Thanks go out to Steve Duranceau for his help with the program; Pam London-Exner, Bina Nayak, and Marjorie Craig, who were this year’s best paper selection committee; and all of the moderators for helping to bring the program to life. We cannot do this without all your efforts.

At the close of the conference, the chair position for the section was passed to my longtime friend, Emilie Moore. She will make an excellent chair in 2022. Congratulations Emilie! Well deserved. Hopefully, there will be fewer challenges than we faced in 2020 and 2021.

The section is doing well and that is because of our members! Thanks go to all of you.

Water Industry Issues and Challenges

Moving ahead we have much to look forward to and be thankful for, but there is still much to do. As I noted last month, infrastructure conditions, funding, and staffing are big issues. We had utility and local government entities in the state attacked by ransomware, so we must be diligent in the war against cyber criminals. The conference technical program included a session about this topic and we must remain vigilant.

We included a session at the conference on people issues. Workers want better salaries and better working conditions to return to their jobs, and there is a lot of competition for good workers. The market that we compete in has moved ahead of our human resource departments. Salaries are well below what will be needed to lure younger, qualified candidates and it’s part of our decades-long challenge to attract and retain employees. When you pay an engineer $20,000 below market, you will not fill the position.

Engineers are not the only positions below market. Our human resources surveys need to expand beyond comparisons among utilities—we all pay too little. We need to compare ourselves to other industries with similar skill needs to see how far behind we are. Educated and talented people will make us more innovative and more
efficient. Our past chairs noted this at their recent meeting.

Water is a vital resource—we all need it and the value of water is underpriced. We had a session on this at the conference. We need water and sewer more than cable television, internet, and cell phone service; our elected bodies and local government managers need to understand this challenge. If you are doing a rate study comparing your rates to the cable and phone utilities in your community, they will of course be higher.

Finances were an issue at our conference. We noted that we need to be careful when we compare ourselves to similar utilities (treatment, customer base and character, usage, etc.), especially with respect to rates. We tend to look at our neighbors, but you can’t compare yourself to the big utilities or utilities that have different treatment methods. Comparing Dania Beach to Fort Lauderdale makes no sense because there really is an economy of scale that exists in our industry. I have more than 20 years of data, with the same results every time I look at them. Smaller utilities will have a higher cost per thousand gallons to the customer than a large utility; if your utility doesn’t, you are not funding something. Economy of scale says it cannot happen.

We also had several conference sessions dealing with assets and management/assessment of those assets. A geographic information system (GIS) is a tool that needs to be used in our utilities; however, any GIS-based asset management system need not be complicated, but it must involve the field staff. If staff members gather the data, is solves two issues: they get to know the system and they can address the issues with drawings. We need to share information. The top-down GIS system or the one tightly controlled by one or two people is doomed to fail in the long run. That was one of the messages from the supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA)/asset management session.

Being innovative is a continuing theme. If it rains and your wastewater flows go up, you have an inflow problem. That’s a very different fix than an infiltration issue, such as groundwater. There are simple methods to solve inflow. Davie, Pembroke Pines, Dania Beach, Hallandale Beach, Venice, Deltona, St. Cloud, and Clewiston are among the utilities that have or are trying to solve inflow, then focusing on infiltration. Clewiston’s efforts over the past two and a half years have cut wastewater flows in half and eliminated flows that exceeded plant capacity during rainstorms. Maybe they didn’t need that consent order—just inflow and infiltration projects? But our systems are not stationary—things constantly change.

Potable reuse is now a thing in Florida! We have been studying this for 15 years, first in south Florida and now in central Florida. This is the future, as noted in our conference session on potable reuse. People continue to move to Florida, but much of the state is water-limited or limited in its ability to manage excess; potable reuse will resolve this issue. We have the technology: reverse osmosis, ultraviolet processes, and peroxide were demonstrated to remove emerging contaminants in Pembroke Pines, but we need the protocols to ensure reliability of the technology and operations. The reality is that most surface water supplies have been doing indirect potable reuse for years—your water supply was someone else’s discharge. The current problem is the “yuck” factor, which will require public education.

Public education is a challenge, in part, because of attacks by elected officials on the media, science, education, public health, etc. Everyone has a job to do and most do their best, as was noted in our session on this topic.

There is one set of facts, and we depend on that one set of facts, but in truth, the full set of facts may not be known. Uncertainty is the world we live in, and that troubles many people who want cut-and-dried decisions. We all know those decisions are hard to come by—we must deal with uncertainty every day. That’s part of the challenge that we have accepted in our industry. Radical uncertainty is a term to identify the “unknown unknown” that often has a major effect on our efforts. COVID-19 was one. We have no idea what the next “unknown unknown” will be.

**Stronger Together**

Our Founding Fathers used the Latin phrase E Pluribus Unum, or “out of many, one” as our country’s motto. We used the motto on our coins and other instruments until 1954 when Congress changed it to “In God We Trust.” Our Founding Fathers were onto something; they understood the significance of this motto, and its importance in the survival and growth of an infant nation. It remained true in 1858 when Abraham Lincoln said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” It remains true today—for the country and in our industry. We are stronger together.

We have many challenges to face and we need to face them together. As I have tried to note through my columns this year, what affects one, affects us all. Gone are the days when issue arise, affecting only one. We are better working together.

Our section provides the opportunity to share experiences and gain knowledge on how to meet the challenges we face; however, we need to understand that we must listen, understand, and act together. We are in this together and we do a fantastic job—truly, a fantastic job.

**Thank You!**

Congratulations to everyone on a fantastic year and thanks to all of you for your efforts. Be proud of what you do. Talk about it, because people need to know. They depend on you even if they don’t realize it.

I leave you with a few photos of my travels to Colorado—we need a little winter in our lives this time of the year.

Happy Holidays to all of you. Enjoy those close to you, and may 2022 allow us to fully reopen and enjoy the activities we have in the past!