WaterISAC COVID-19 Working Group Call
March 24, 2020

Discussion:

Supply Chain Concerns

- Lime is used by water utilities for water softening and for pH control.
  - An Ohio utility noted it has its own lime kiln and has been continuing production and serving as a supplier for surrounding cities. The state recognizes the drivers of the trucks carrying the lime as providing an essential service.
- One utility noted the importance of there continuing to be interstate shipping of chemicals, noting some of these (in this case lime and hypochlorite) come from nearby states.

Employee Access

- One utility had meetings with local and county emergency management officials two weeks ago to inform them of employees’ first responder status. Additionally, as a result of the governor’s stay-at-home order, the utility supplied to its employees a document with utility letterhead listing them as essential employees and copying information from the recently released U.S. Department of Homeland Security Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers during COVID-19 Response.
  - Another utility did something similar, referencing its state’s governor’s description of critical infrastructure employees, which includes the sector.
- One utility had to identify employees who aren’t essential and place them on temporary emergency leave. A list of essential employees has been provided to the city manager’s office.
- The mayor of a large city in which a utility operates ordered all non-essential employees to telework, which necessitated a lot of quick action on the part of the utility. The utility has been making increasing use of Office 365. The utility has had some issues with timekeeping, but now it has a portal where staff can log in to do this. For employees who are teleworking and who don’t have equipment, the utility is assessing equipment needs. For those who still need equipment, the utility is looking at the possibility of short term leases to get them equipment.

Longer Shifts and Potential for Employee Strain

- One utility has worked with the union to come to an agreement about the new shifts, which for some employees involve working longer hours. The utility is also putting in for a waiver for employees whose salaries would normally make them ineligible for over time compensation (normally they get comp time).
- One utility decided to not implement a shift that would have involved putting employees on 7 days on/7 days off rotations out of concerns for employee fatigue. The utility also eliminated the day of overlap in the middle of the week. This also isolates one part of the staff from the other.
- One utility has gone to a four-day workweek and has minimized the amount of employee overlap. Employees are still being paid for a 40-hour workweek, regardless of how many hours they actually work (unless they go over, then they get over time). And in the event it’s needed, the utility is prepared to go to quarantine in place. The requirement in that case would be for...
two people to work 12 on/12 off shifts. The utility would rotate staff in and out depending on their COVID-19 status.

- One utility, which noted it has activated its pandemic response plan (part of its emergency response plan), experienced some problems with its electricians because it has to offer them a certain amount of time each week. This was eventually settled. The utility has implemented temporary emergency leave for the majority of employees and has been able to go back to a normal 8 hour schedule (initially it had been implementing a 12 hour schedule). The utility says its current approach will help with social distancing, mostly because of there being fewer employees.

COVID-19 Infections

- At one utility, an operator’s wife was sent home with a fever. The utility directed him to self-quarantine for two weeks at home or until her status was further defined. This action was identified in the utility’s contingency plan, which the utility can tolerate up to a certain number of operators. If it goes beyond that number, the utility will quarantine operators in the plant. The utility has at least six volunteers for this duty.
- One utility noted difficulties with getting tested, unless someone is in the hospital, as well as the lack of tests, including for people who operate critical infrastructure. The utility indicated the concerns with not knowing someone’s status.
- The utility where the operator’s wife had been sent home with a fever indicated the couple has not had much success with getting tested.
- One utility stated a mobile testing site has been set up at a local university. The parents of a utility worker who had symptoms were able to get tested and were cleared, enabling the employee to go back to work after a few days. The utility added that staff don’t have a priority, noting that they just need a doctor’s note to get tested.
- One utility explained to get tested you have to meet certain criteria and have a doctor’s note, adding that this is a problem.

Service Consumption

- One utility has noticed an 11% drop in consumption for water services. For wastewater, the utility has not noticed an increase in flushable wipes. The utility has been active in social media about what not to flush as well as the safety of the drinking water regarding COVID-19.
- Another utility has had a significant drop in consumption, likely because a large university that’s nearby has shut down. The utility has actually shut down at night due to the decline in consumption.
- A third utility indicated an approximate 9% decrease in consumption.
- One utility said the level of usage has remained consistent.

PPE

- One utility has a water supply store that had the foresight to start controlling the consumption of PPE and put orders in for replenishments ahead of time.
  - One challenge for the utility is that the state governor directed that employees have their temperatures taken before they start work. The utility is not able to do this and has thermometers on back order.
As far as other PPE, the utility has enough stocks on hand.

- Another utility agreed, noting the one thing they’ve found it difficult to find is thermometers.
  - It seems the utility has little need for face masks.
  - The utility added it is looking for single-use, disposable thermometers.
  - The utility is also looking for a UV light mechanism to disinfect packages.

- A utility noted it hasn’t had any problems issuing or ordering PPE supplies, noting it has sufficient quantities on hand. However, ordering new PPE supplies is now going through the logistics section of the city’s office of emergency management (any large orders).

- For wastewater utilities, N95 masks aren’t normally worn. Normally only gloves are used, such as if employees are out on wastewater aeration basins. A utility indicated it hasn’t had any problems getting gloves, and it noted it had secured a small quantity of N95 masks from its local fire department in case any employees express concerns.

Cybersecurity

- One utility noted it is seeing a higher number of phishing attempts, not all of which are specific to the COVID-19 situation.
  - The utility noted a couple staff received a fake email purporting to come from the town mayor. The email had a number of indications it was a fraudulent email (such as poor English).

- One utility has observed a large increase in the number of fake invoicing emails, believing that threat actors are attempting to capitalize on the current time when a lot of people are doing emergency purchasing and are distracted. So far the attempts have been poor and employees have detected these.