

Backflow Industry- Educating America: Who is Protecting the Water?

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I recently had the opportunity to read an essay written by a high school student from a small town in the Midwest who wrote about water quality in his city. To say I was surprised by the comments and answers to his questions by the local water superintendent would be a gross understatement. I was shocked!

The superintendent was quoted as saying, "Contrary to some beliefs, toilets pose no threat," and the only real cross-connection concerns in the town are "the swimming pool, the car wash, and the high school because the soda machines use a large amount of water." He made no mention of the local coin laundry, the restaurants, the funeral parlor, the irrigated fields at the sports complex or the many residences—just to name a few.

The Importance of Education

It's obvious from the superintendent's comments that those responsible for protecting our water are falling short when it comes to educating the public. Most states require that annual reports be sent to the Department of Environmental Quality by the local water systems. Are these forms being completed properly or honestly? Do the state authorities even read them? Do the citizens? When deficiencies are noted, what is done? Who is responsible for implementation and compliance?

Obviously, the importance of water quality, and what to do to ensure it, is not being conveyed. Who is responsible for the ignorance? That answer is actually quite simple. We must look to ourselves: the American Society of Sanitary Engineering and the American Backflow Prevention Association. We are the experts; we need to become the teachers. We all must do better at educating the citizens. It is truly the responsibility of everyone in our industry.

There is a little nursery rhyme which I learned in Sunday school, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." It is time to let our light shine. We understand the problem of poor water quality, and we know the reason this problem exists. It is our responsibility to take on the task of educating those who do not possess this knowledge and expertise.

Networking and Beyond

"Networking" is a frequent reason given by many when asked why they join a trade organization. I truly believe that the networking system is a two-way street, and we must give as much as we get. We must spread our message whenever and wherever we meet with others in the water and plumbing-related industry. When we overhear misconceptions being expounded upon, we need to help correct the wrong ideas. To do this, we do not need to be forceful, just accurate.

As I travel around this great country of ours, I have the opportunity to meet and listen to many in the water industry. I am always amazed at the number of people who are charged with inspecting and protecting water systems who cannot be bothered with inspecting toilet tanks for approved and properly installed ball-cocks or that, when they see a commercial ice maker, they automatically demand that a backflow preventer be installed without even checking to see if the unit is properly protected by an air-gap.

I believe that the vast majority of water purveyors are proud of what they do and are willing to take the necessary steps to protect their water and deliver a safe clean product. Just sometimes, perhaps in a hurry to finish the task, they don't go beyond the job at hand. They don't take the time to thoroughly and properly protect the water supply, often because it would involve educating those paying their bill as to why it's important. Water protection gets the short shift.

Take the Time to Teach

As professionals in the plumbing industry, we must go to the people who need our help most—the purveyors. This, in my opinion, is the most important place to start since the person in charge of cross-connection control may not have any experience in the world of plumbing. As we all know, employment job opportunities in the government sector do not always go to the person with the best, or even proper, credentials. It is common for such positions to go to those with influence rather than experience.

A good friend of mine was a *well head inspector* the day before being promoted to cross-connection control manager of a major water system composed of eight metropolitan cities. As a very conscientious person, he began to study everything he could pertaining to his new position, but, needless to say, he had a rough first year. I'd guess that he spent more time on the phone with me than he did in the field. I taught, and he learned—to the benefit of both.

I am not suggesting that we all must go one on one with managers or inspectors; however, we must offer the opportunity of education whenever we can.

Conclusion

Next year, our ASSE annual meeting in St. Louis will focus on backflow prevention. We should start now to promote the conference to our friends in the water distribution sector. The benefits are two-fold: to spread the word about the importance of water quality and also to achieve better attendance at our conference.

It is time to teach!



Backflow industry concerns are a to be a regular feature in this magazine. If you have a question, comment or concern about a particular backflow issue, e-mail Paul Bladdick at backflowservices@comcast.net. ●