

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Dr. Eileen O'Neill, Ph.D., Executive Director, Water Environment Federation (WEF)**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Demands, Challenges and Opportunities of Our Water Systems**

The urgent issues regarding water infrastructure probably have some things in common with other kinds of infrastructure, but also some things are specific and different to water infrastructure. Many of our systems are past their useful lives and we have not been able to invest in them in the way we would like. So we have an opportunity for infrastructure renewal. We also have demands on our infrastructure from population growth, generally, and population shifts, so we have need for expanded infrastructure. We also have, perhaps, different kinds of challenges than we had when some of our infrastructure was put in place: different kinds of pollutants, some issues around more diffuse sources of pollutants, from stormwater runoffs and this sort of thing. We also have challenges related to climate change and different kinds of weather patterns which all seem to play out in water too much, too little, at the wrong time, in the wrong place. Then we have some opportunities around technology and new technology. We deal a lot on the clean-water side, where we are taking used water and cleaning it and allowing it to be recycled and be returned to the environment. But the challenges are the same on both sides, and we and our colleagues who deal with drinking water systems are very focused on how are these systems effectively maintained so that we are all confident that reinvestment in them is a good investment and a sound investment. There are a number of things going on there: in some cases you've got communities that were once larger and trying to maintain systems that were configured for much larger populations. We also have the "out of sight, out of mind" situation with water infrastructure much more than other kinds of infrastructure. For us, much of the value in those assets is actually underground, and it can be relatively easy not to think about that, particularly if generally one turns the tap on, the water coming through is clean and safe to drink. There is a lot happening in terms of challenges and in terms of opportunities, and there's a large need for investment in our water infrastructure.

### **Who Pays for Water?**

In some communities, there is an affordability challenge. What we see, particularly on the clean-water side, is that in the 1970s when our systems were being built up, there was a federal investment; there were construction grants, there was enormous growth, but there has been a decline in that investment at the federal level. I believe the figure used to be at 63% federal invested; that's gone down to 9% these days. So it's the local communities that are actually paying the cost of these systems, and they need to understand the value and the importance of the systems to the quality of life, and to the economic vitality of their communities. They also need to have confidence that their investment is a good investment. Certainly most of these systems are paid for at the local level, and we are very supportive of some tools in the toolbox from the federal level that can provide loan programs, since it's basically we, the ratepayers, that are paying for this.

### **Showing Communities That Water Is Worth the Investment**

We need to tell our story of the value of investment in infrastructure and the importance of water. I do think that it resonates with people. Many of us are engineers, and we like to lead with the solution, we're problem solvers, but I think when we engage and listen to the public and we explain some of the challenges, I think we'll get a good response. I also think that we're making sure that we are showing that we manage our systems well, and we are talking about solutions that can help in terms of some of the tools in the federal toolbox that can support investments in infrastructure through the state revolving fund program or through new tools making preferential loan rates available to communities. I think it makes sense to people when they hear about the challenges of these older systems, the value that water provides to them personally and to their communities in terms of return on investment and quality of life. Because, after all, these are our systems; they are owned by the public, so it's investing in our own systems.

### **Water Environment Federation: Supporting Front-Line Water Professionals**

We're a not-for-profit professional society for environmental scientists and engineers and others who work in the water field. We were founded in 1928 by some forward-looking US state organizations who realized that, to serve the membership, they really wanted to make national and even international connections. And we were founded to publish a journal, which we still publish, and to organize a conference, which has grown to be the largest annual water quality conference in the world. It's called WEFTEC. We see ourselves as supporting, connecting water professionals who are on the front lines of treating and recycling water and generally protecting the water environment.

**[www.InfrastructureUSA.org](http://www.InfrastructureUSA.org)  
212.414.9220  
[info@infrastructureusa.org](mailto:info@infrastructureusa.org)**