



2026 Rural Water Rally

By: Roger Noe, Deputy Director

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Newsletter

THE ILLINOIS RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION

The **National Rural Water Association Rural Water Rally February 2-4 2026** opened in Washington, DC with a sense of urgency, pride, and shared purpose. From the moment attendees gathered for the opening session, it was clear this would be more than just another policy event—it was a reminder of the collective strength behind rural water and wastewater systems across the nation.

The session began with a warm welcome and opening remarks from **Phillip Combs, NRWA Board President**, who set the tone for the days ahead. He spoke passionately about the power of the Association and the critical role state affiliates play in advancing NRWA’s mission. Combs emphasized that NRWA’s influence comes from unity—state by state, system by system—working together and fully engaging with the programs offered to support rural communities. His remarks reinforced the idea that when affiliates remain connected and aligned, rural water has a stronger, more effective voice in Washington.

That message of unity and impact carried through the rest of the opening session. **Senator John Boozman of Arkansas**, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, delivered the VIP presentation. He highlighted the essential role rural water and wastewater utilities play in public health, economic development, and quality of life in rural America. Senator Boozman acknowledged the challenges facing rural systems and reaffirmed his support for federal programs that help small communities maintain and improve their infrastructure. His presence and remarks underscored the importance of continued engagement between NRWA and federal lawmakers.

The program continued with remarks from **Karl Elmshaeuser, Administrator for the Rural Utilities Service (RUS)**, who discussed the ongoing partnership between RUS and rural utilities nationwide. He spoke about the importance of sustained investment in water and wastewater infrastructure and recognized the dedication of operators, managers, and board members who keep these systems running every day. His comments reinforced the idea that federal agencies and rural utilities must continue working together to meet both current needs and future challenges.

Following these presentations, the **NRWA DC staff** outlined the key messages and priorities that attendees would take to Capitol Hill. They provided guidance on how to effectively communicate with members of Congress and their staff, ensuring that the concerns of rural water systems would be clearly and consistently presented. The focus was on protecting and strengthening rural water programs, addressing aging infrastructure, and finding solutions to the growing workforce crisis within the industry.

The opening session concluded with remarks from **Matt Holmes, NRWA CEO**, who spoke about the true power of the Association. He reminded attendees that NRWA represents thousands of systems and millions of rural Americans, and that collective advocacy is what drives meaningful change. Holmes emphasized that every conversation on Capitol Hill matters and that the work done during the Rally directly supports the long-term sustainability of rural communities.

Representing the **Illinois Rural Water Association (IRWA)** at the Rally were **Don Craig, Executive Director; Roger Noe, Deputy Director; and board members Greg Bates, Steve Fletcher, Casey Johnson, and Brian Strike**. The Illinois delegation came prepared to advocate strongly for rural water programs and the communities they serve. During the Rally, IRWA split into two groups to maximize their outreach, meeting with members of Congress and their staff to discuss critical issues impacting rural water and wastewater systems. The days on Capitol Hill were fast-paced and demanding. With a partial government shutdown underway, members of the House of Representatives were frequently pulled away from meetings to cast votes, adding to the hectic nature of the schedule. Despite these challenges, the Illinois delegation successfully met with staffers in each office. These meetings provided valuable opportunities to discuss the pressing need for infrastructure funding, the realities of operating and maintaining aging systems, and the workforce crisis that continues to affect the rural water industry nationwide.

Throughout each discussion, IRWA emphasized the importance of federal rural water programs and the tangible benefits they provide to small communities. The delegation shared real-world examples of how these programs support public health, environmental protection, and economic stability in rural Illinois. The conversations were productive, respectful, and encouraging, with staffers demonstrating a clear understanding of the issues and a willingness to support solutions.

By the end of the Rally, the hard work paid off. Every office expressed support for IRWA’s goals and acknowledged the critical role the Association plays in serving rural communities. The overall experience reinforced the value of showing up, telling the rural water story, and building relationships with policymakers.

The 2026 Rural Water Rally was a reminder that advocacy is not easy—but it is essential. Through unity, persistence, and clear messaging, NRWA and its state affiliates once again demonstrated the strength of rural water and the lasting impact of working together for the communities they serve.



Lift Station Maintenance

By: Jeff McCready, Wastewater Technician

Lift stations are a key component of most sanitary sewer collection systems. Some of you are fortunate enough to have the entire collection system be totally gravity fed to the treatment plant, but the majority rely on lift stations to pump the waste to the treatment plant. Some of you may have 1 lift station while others may have up to 10 or more, depending on the community size and lay of the land. One thing is for certain, no matter how many you have, a lift station not operating properly can turn out to be a bad day for an operator and possibly homeowners/businesses. Proper maintenance of lift stations can help prevent issues from happening such as SSO's and homeowner backups.

A lot of facilities have SCADA Systems to monitor their lift stations, telling you things like what the water levels are in the wet wells, how many gallons are pumped per day, what pump is running and how many GPM. All that is great information, but visual/manual inspections are an integral part of lift station maintenance.

Below are some suggestions for lift station maintenance and may not cover everything that needs done at your station, depending on the type. Be sure to maintain detailed logs of all maintenance performed.

WEEKLY:

- * Record pump times and compare the hours to be within 10% of each pump
- * Manually test all lights and alarms
- * Inspect wet wells and clear all surface debris
- * Ensure sump pumps in dry pit lift stations and valve vaults are working
- * Confirm dehumidifiers in older dry pit lift stations are operating properly
- * Check that all panels/gates are secured and locked

MONTHLY:

- * Pump/Motor inspection – run manually and check for unusual noises, vibrations and leaks
- * Inspect control panels for corrosion and damaged wires
- * Check that floats and transducers are clean and free of built-up grease, rags, etc.



QUARTERLY:

- * Test backup generators and run under a load if not preset to do so
- * Check fuel levels if not running off natural gas
- * See that submersible pumps are pulled and inspected to ensure the impeller is free of debris
- * Inspect check valves for proper operation and not allowing any backflow
- * Exercise all gate valves
- * Review and maintain filters on any ventilation system

ANNUALLY:

- * Pump down and clean wet wells of all grease and debris to avoid pump damage (may require being done semi-annually)
- * Calibrate all level sensors, transducers, and flow meters



IRWA Support Letters Are Needed

IRWA employees are dedicated in helping the water and wastewater systems throughout the state in making onsite visits and providing technical assistance in helping to ensure your systems have safe and quality water. Please take a moment to thank any or all of the IRWA employees who have helped your system by writing an appreciation letter on your letterhead and mail to:

Illinois Rural Water Association
P.O. Box 49
Taylorville, IL 62568



Getting Your Wastewater Project off the Ground

By: **Scott Tozier, WW Quality Action Specialist**

Some of the hardest decisions for an operator to make is when a system is in need of a project to keep their system in compliance of State regulations. Many systems wait until they are under Violation Notice to address what they usually know is failing system but the Operator has little help from boards to get funding or look into funding options for the Municipal Treatment systems. Part of my New job is to help communities identify projects as well as look into scope of the potential project and appropriate funding sources for the project.

Most operators have no idea where to even start when it comes to these projects. Illinois Rural Water is a great resource for either Water or Wastewater funding needs. On the wastewater side whether its IEPA Clean Water SRF funding or US Rural Development funding options, we can point you in the right direction to get a project started. Larger projects in this State rely heavily on these two funding sources due to low-cost long-term loans available and the CWSRF program has principal loan forgiveness for communities with low or moderate Median Household Income. The current SRF funding interest rates are standard rate of 2.16% with small community rate of 2.16% and a hardship rate of 1.00%.

Most Municipalities have no idea what their qualifications are for these loans to bring failing systems back into regular compliance. My job as a funding Specialist is to help our members look at these funding options and help projects apply for funding in conjunction with Professional Engineers. If you don't already have a PE that regularly works with your City or Village we can help find an engineer in your region that can guide you through the process of applying for these funds.

Another great option for smaller projects is the NRWA loan fund, this source of low percentage loans is for maintenance, predevelopment, Energy Efficiency as well as Disaster Recovery and Emergency projects that might fit into the range of up to \$200,000 with a 10-year repayment term and below market interest of currently 3.125%. They do require a 25% match from the community that is applying for the loan, but turn around time on funds is a major plus for this option.

Another great source is the Rural Water finance Agency, Loans from \$10,000 to \$30,000,000 can be financed. Rates vary but at the time of this article 15-year fixed rates were 3.75%- and 30-year rates were 4.69%. The benefit of RWFA is the quick turn around time from application to funds being available. Typically 90 to 120 days is the turnaround time on these loans, they have flex term programs as well as Interim plans with a 2 year interest rate of 4.15% to help get projects started with loans to get Preliminary engineering going on projects of a larger scale, then these loans can be folded in to the CWSRF or USDA loan.

As you can see there is many options for funding and depending on how big or small the project, I can help your community decide what the best option may be or come up with all the options and present them to your Board. Whether its rehabilitation of pump station or a new treatment facility we can get you in touch with the right people to get the process headed in the right direction. Feel free to call our office or contact me directly to help you get your Wastewater project started.

IRWA'S MISSION STATEMENT

“Protecting and preserving the water and wastewater resources of Rural Illinois through education, representation and on-site technical assistance”

UPCOMING IRWA EVENTS

Water Training Session	-	May 5	-	Freeport
Water Training Session	-	July 2	-	Rock Island
IRWA Administrative Conference	-	July 16 & 17, 2026	-	Effingham
IRWA 23rd Annual Golf Outing	-	August 21, 2026	-	Auburn
IRWA Northern Conference	-	October 27 & 28	-	Rockford

Fluoride in Focus

By: Rich Adams, Sourcewater Protection Specialist

Fluoride is getting some national attention lately. For years, it has largely been treated as a routine treatment chemical. Systems set their feed rates, hit the recommended target, submit their samples, and move on. Over the past year, however, the conversation around fluoride has shifted at the federal level, and that shift is starting to draw more attention nationwide.

Much of that attention stems from the direction of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.. Secretary Kennedy has publicly questioned long-standing fluoridation practices and has emphasized concerns about cumulative fluoride exposure, particularly in children. While HHS does not regulate drinking water systems directly, its policy positions influence national public health guidance and shape the broader regulatory discussion.

In line with that shift, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced action to remove certain unapproved ingestible fluoride prescription products for children from the market. These are fluoride drops and tablets that are swallowed rather than used topically. The FDA stated that many of these products were never formally approved and cited concerns about potential health risks associated with systemic ingestion. Although this action does not apply to community water fluoridation, it reflects a broader federal reevaluation of fluoride exposure.

At the same time, the Environmental Protection Agency has initiated a review of fluoride under the Safe Drinking Water Act. According to reporting by Reuters, the EPA is reassessing

current toxicity data to determine whether existing federal standards should be revised. The current Maximum Contaminant Level remains 4.0 mg/L, with a secondary standard of 2.0 mg/L. No changes to those limits have been finalized.

So far, for Illinois systems, nothing has changed from a compliance standpoint. State law continues to require fluoridation for most community water supplies, and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency continues to enforce existing monitoring, reporting, and operational requirements. Target levels, sampling schedules, and feed system expectations remain the same.

Looking ahead, a few possibilities are worth watching. If the EPA's review results in a revised MCL or updated health-based guidance, Illinois could adjust compliance targets or monitoring requirements accordingly. Changes at the federal public health level could also prompt legislative discussion at the state level, as has already occurred in several other states that have moved to prohibit fluoridation. Even without immediate regulatory changes, operators should expect increased questions from local officials and customers as the topic remains in the national spotlight.

At this stage, fluoride remains a regulated chemical with unchanged requirements in Illinois. The key takeaway is not that immediate action is needed, but that the issue is actively being reevaluated at the federal level. Staying aware of developments from EPA and state regulators will help ensure systems are prepared if adjustments are made in the months or years ahead.



Administrative Conference

July 16 & 17, 2026

Holiday Inn * Effingham, IL