

**STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD  
BOARD MEETING SESSION – DIVISION OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE  
NOVEMBER 8, 2023**

**ITEM 8**

**SUBJECT**

OFFICE OF OPERATOR CERTIFICATION PROGRAM UPDATES.

**DISCUSSION**

This informational item is to provide a status update on the Office of Operator Certification (OOC), including the recommendations that were made by the Drinking Water Operator Certification Program (DWOCP) and Wastewater Operator Certification Program (WWOCP) Advisory Committees and State Water Board Resources Control Board (State Water Board) staff responses to those recommendations.

Reorganization

Beginning January 2023, the OOC began the implementation phase of its reorganization to optimize resources and improve processes, workflow, and operational efficiency by balancing staffing resources and realigning workload by functionality as opposed to a programmatic structure. As a result, each OOC unit performs primary functions that include examinations, renewals, and certifications for drinking water and wastewater.

Hybrid Work Environment

In January 2023, the OOC resumed a hybrid work environment (1 telework day per week). The OOC evaluates operational needs frequently to ensure the hybrid work schedule does not negatively impact work processes. On average, the processing times are within 30-45 days of receiving a completed application.

Operator Certification Customer Service Survey

The OOC launched a customer service survey in March 2023 to receive stakeholder feedback. As of August 31, 2023, 103 individuals have completed the survey with an average overall rating of 3.5 out of 5. The OOC assesses survey responses to improve customer service and identify any emerging issues. The OOC provides the survey results to the Advisory Committees, California-Nevada Section of the American Water Works Association (CA-NV AWWA), and the California Water Environment Association (CWEA) on a semi-annual basis.

## Online Application Submittal Portal

The OOC has initiated development of an interactive online application portal to allow applicants the ability to submit applications electronically, review and resolve application deficiencies online, and track application status. In September 2023, in coordination with the State Water Board's Division of Information Technology (DIT), the OOC launched Phase I of the portal allowing applicants and operators to submit examination applications for Grades 1 and 2 examinations for both the DWOCP and the WWOCP electronically. Subsequent phases will integrate higher grades and more complex certification and renewal applications as the portal is developed.

## Advisory Committee Recommendations and Responses

On June 27, 2023, four sub workgroups made recommendations to the DWOCP and WWOCP Advisory Committees for consideration at a Joint Advisory Committee meeting. The proposed recommendations included:

- Utilizing a guidance document on reporting drinking water operator experience;
- Modifications to the wastewater Operator-in-Training (OIT) requirement and experience;
- Amending experience requirements for certified drinking water treatment operators at advanced treatment facilities; and
- Establishing clear processes and procedures in implementing Assembly Bill 1588, in recognizing military experience.

The Advisory Committees approved all the recommendations, while recognizing that some of the recommendations need further development or need modification to meet legal requirements, and that further discussion is warranted.

On August 29, 2023, the OOC presented feedback to the DWOCP and WWOCP Advisory Committees at a second Joint Advisory Committee meeting. The OOC identified which recommendations were considered, which recommendations were not considered, and the priority for implementation. The top recommendations considered from each sub workgroup include:

- Approval of a guidance document that outlines the OOC process for evaluating and awarding experience credit for drinking water operators, including dual certificate holders;
- Modify the OIT education requirement so that the required six education points may be earned after the OIT certification is obtained but prior to expiration;
- Modify the drinking water experience requirement to include experience at advanced water treatment facilities for certified drinking water treatment operators; and

- Assess the feasibility of providing reciprocity or an examination waiver to individuals with military experience in the operation of drinking water and wastewater treatment plants.

The only recommendation not considered is the recommendation to allow agencies the option to bypass the OIT certification requirement by establishing a formal OIT apprenticeship program and seeking approval of the program from the OOC. After further discussion at the August 29, 2023 Joint Advisory Committee meeting, the OOC and the WWOCP Advisory Committee are not in favor of this recommendation because it is undetermined which agencies would benefit and the cost associated with implementing and administering an apprenticeship program, especially for small, rural agencies.

The OOC will meet with the Advisory Committees and sub workgroups as needed to keep them informed of an implementation plan for the recommendations considered.

In addition, OOC management will continue frequent meetings with the CA-NV AWWA and the CWEA to discuss action plans to address issues and concerns in terms of program updates, stakeholder engagement, workforce development, and alignment of operator certification policies and procedures with water industry changes (advanced treatment).

### Translation of Examinations

Over the years, the State Water Board has heard from some stakeholders expressing an interest in having operator certification examinations translated into another language, primarily into Spanish.

On August 29, 2023, at a Joint Advisory Committee meeting, the Office of Public Participation (OPP) led a robust discussion regarding the potential policy and regulatory implications of the State Water Board offering translated examinations. The OPP provided background and asked a series of questions. The Advisory Committee members and other stakeholders expressed their issues and concerns with offering translated operator certification examinations, including concerns regarding public health, safety, the environment, resources, and equity. A consensus was not reached on the topic. The OOC and OPP will continue internal discussions to revisit the issues and identify the next steps. This topic will be discussed during future Advisory Committee meetings to seek further input from the Advisory Committees and inform stakeholders of how the State Water Board will address these issues and concerns.

### **POLICY ISSUE**

None.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

None.

**REGIONAL BOARD IMPACT**

None.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

None.