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Wastewater Operator Certification Program Frequently Asked Questions

Effective July 1, 2014, the responsibility for California's operator certification program for operators of public water systems was transferred from the California Department of Public Health to the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Boards). The transfer was accomplished by means of the addition of the new Section 116271 to the Health and Safety Code. The State Water Board's Office of Operator Certification is comprised of two programs.

Drinking Water Operator Certification Program (DWOCP) - The goal of the program is to ensure that skilled professionals are overseeing the treatment and distribution of safe drinking water. Operator certification is an important step in promoting compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA).

Wastewater Operator Certification Program (WWOCP) – The goal is to ensure that operators of wastewater treatment facilities in the State meet the minimum level of competence; thereby, protecting public health and the environment.

All sections, subsections, or tables cited within this document are referenced from the California Code of Regulations, Title 23 Waters, Division 3 of the State Water Resources Control Board and Regional Water Quality Control Boards, Chapter 26 Wastewater Treatment Plant Classification, Operator Certification, and Contract Operator Registration, and the 2016 Assembly Bill 2890.

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. What is the Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Certification Program (WWOCP)?

The WWOCP certifies operators, registers contract operators, and classifies wastewater treatment plants. WWOCP conducts the certification examinations required by the regulations, processes applications, certificates and certification renewals. To contact the WWOCP, see our contact information at:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/operator_certification.shtml.

2. What is the difference between drinking water and wastewater operator certification?

Drinking water operator certification is separate from wastewater operator certification. Drinking water operator certification is required to work as an operator in a treatment and/or distribution plant that produces water for human consumption in homes and businesses. Wastewater treatment plant operator certification is required to work as an operator in a treatment plant that receives and treats wastewater from homes and businesses. The Drinking Water and Wastewater Operator Certification programs are part of the Division of Financial Assistance (DFA) within the State Water Board. Each program is guided by its own set of regulations, based on different sections of California Law, the DWOCP is based upon the California Health and Safety Code and the WWOCP is based upon the California Water Code. Before July 1, 2014, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) administered the drinking water operator certification program. The Drinking Water program processes applications, administers examinations, and issues certificates to applicants who meet the requirements for distribution and treatment certification.

- 3. How do I change my address with the Wastewater Office of Operator Certification?**
If you have a change of address, complete the Change of Contact form and provide WWOCP with the updated information. Signature is required. Please submit your signed form via email, fax, or mail the completed form back to our office for processing.
- 4. How can I get a job as a wastewater treatment plant operator?**
WWOCP is not responsible for the hiring or employment of wastewater operators. Owners of wastewater treatment plants, including cities, counties, special districts, and private owners hire operators for their wastewater treatment plants. Additionally, registered wastewater contract operator companies hire contract operators for wastewater treatment plants that they staff. Potential sources of job listings are local newspapers and water/wastewater agency web sites.
- 5. How can I find a certified operator for my wastewater treatment plant?**
WWOCP is permitted to release the names, addresses, and grades of certified operators that have authorized WWOCP to release their personal information to owners of wastewater treatment plants for recruitment purposes. Plant Owners should submit mailing list requests by using the Request for Mailing List of Certified Operators form. If a private company is recruiting for an owner, the owner should submit the form and indicate in the *Special Instructions* section, the name and email address or physical address where WWOCP should send the mailing list. We can send the mailing list via email or by mail. We only are permitted to release this information to owners or authorized designated representatives of wastewater treatment plants.
- 6. How do I add myself to the Mailing List of the Certified Operators?**
Click on the Permission to Release Contact Information form and follow the instructions listed on the website.
- 7. What regulations apply to certified operators and contract operators?**
California Code of Regulations Title 23 Waters, Division 3 of the State Water Resources Control Board and Regional Water Quality Control Boards, Chapter 26 applies the WWOCP. The State Water Board's Operator Certification regulations are located at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/docs/ocr_clean.pdf
- 8. What are the most recent changes to the WWOCP program?**
 - In September 2016, the Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 2890 into law (AB-2890). The bill amends specific sections of the California Water Code that pertains to the WWOCP. Effective January 1, 2017: Operator renewal and certification period will change from two to three years.
 - Adds an additional committee member to the Wastewater Advisory Committee to represent Operators at Water Recycling Treatment Plants.
 - Removes the restriction against accepting for-profit providers for education courses. Applicants can now submit educational documentation from for-profit colleges and universities, and training institutions.

EDUCATION

9. Where can I take wastewater treatment plant operator courses?

Many state university campuses and community colleges offer wastewater treatment training courses. There also are non-profit and for-profit organizations that offer training. Please refer to the Wastewater Operator Certificate Training Directory at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/operator_certification/docs/trng_dir.pdf.

10. Does the WWOCP accept for-profit educational coursework?

As of January 1, 2017, the WWOCP can accept coursework from for-profit organizations and educational entities including for-profit colleges, universities, and professional associations.

11. What educational documentation (transcripts, certificates) are required to submit to meet the educational requirements?

As of January 1, 2017, the Wastewater Operator Certification Program (WWOCP) can **only** accept official or copies of official college or university transcripts. The transcript must display the institution's official seal and/or watermark. If unofficial transcripts were submitted previously, applicants must resubmit official or copies of official transcripts for new qualifications.

12. Does the WWOCP accept foreign coursework?

The WWOCP can award educational points for foreign coursework if the applicant submits a copy of their official college/university transcripts, if their transcript is not in English, a copy that is translated into English must be submitted by a certified translator.

EXAMINATION

13. What are the requirements to take a Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination?

You must meet the minimum educational requirements for the desired grade level by the final filing date deadline. You are not required to obtain experience to take and pass an examination on any Grade level examination; however, you must complete the required experience in order to qualify to become certified as an operator. The Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination is given twice a year, once in April and October. Examinations are scheduled in cities throughout the State of California, and each approved applicant is assigned to an examination site based on their mailing county code.

14. Can I get a refund for the examination fee? How do I request it?

WWOCP cannot refund your application processing fee; however, the examination fee can be refunded. According to the Regulations, Section 3700(e), "An applicant who has paid the examination fee, but does not take an examination, may request a refund of the examination fee from the Office of Operator Certification." For example, if you applied for a grade I examination and paid the \$140.00 fee for the examination (\$70.00 for the Application Processing Fee and \$70.00 for the Examination Fee) and you were not able to make your scheduled examination, you may request a refund for the \$70.00 examination fee. In order to receive an examination fee refund, send in a written, signed request including the following information: the reason why you qualify for a refund, the amount you are requesting (minus the non-refundable application fee), the check number, and who you want to make a check payable to.

15. What if I have a disability and want to request a reasonable accommodation to take the exam, or due to religious reasons unable to test on a Saturday? When submitting an examination application, include a note signed by a medical professional to the WWOCP. The note must include a specific request listing the reasonable accommodation and the term of the accommodation. If unable to test on a Saturday, submit a note from the religious institution.

16. When are applications due for the Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination?

The final filing date deadline is sixty (60) days prior to the scheduled Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination ([Examination Schedule](#)). A complete application package, including fees, must be **RECEIVED** by the WWOCP no later than the final filing date deadline. The State Water Board's regulations do not allow for any exceptions. Applications may be submitted any time before the final filing date deadline.

17. If I pass, how long are my Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator examination results valid?

Passing examination results are valid for four years from the date on the notice of the examination results. You must re-take the examination if you do not obtain certification within four years from the date of the results letter.

18. What study materials are available for the Wastewater Treatment examination?

The WWOCP does not endorse specific reference materials. However, the WWOCP does have a list of suggested [study material](#) that may be helpful.

CERTIFICATION

19. Do I need a certificate to work at a wastewater treatment plant?

Yes, you are required to have a certificate to work as an operator at:

- a.) A facility owned by a state, local, or federal agency;
- b.) A privately owned facility used in the treatment or reclamation of sewage or industrial wastes, and regulated by the Public Utilities Commission;
- c.) Or a privately owned facility used primarily in the treatment or reclamation of sewage, and for which the State Water Board or a Regional Water Board has issued waste discharge requirements.

A wastewater treatment plant operator certificate is needed only if you operate a WWTP.

NOTE: While laboratory technicians and wastewater collections operators are not required to obtain a wastewater treatment operator certification, they can obtain certificates through from the California Water Environment Association (CWEA).

20. How can I get certified?

There are four things that you must do in order to get certified:

- a. Meet the educational requirements - An applicant for an operator certificate must have completed the minimum amount of education prescribed in section 3687 for certification for the desired grade level (or higher).
- b. Pass the Examination You must pass a written wastewater operator examination for the desired grade level certification. Please note that if an applicant takes and passes a higher grade exam they can use the exam results for a lower grade certification. The examinations for all grade levels are given twice each year throughout the State of California, generally once in April and October.
- c. You must meet the experience requirements for the desired grade level. See section 3687, Operator Certification Requirements Table for each certification grade's qualifying experience requirements. To apply for a certificate, submit a complete [application for certification](#). Your experience must be in the operation of a wastewater treatment plant while possessing a valid operator certificate or operator-in-training certificate. NOTE: No experience or passing the wastewater treatment plant operator examination is necessary for a Grade I operator-in-training certificate.
- d. Pay the Operator Certification Fee - See the Wastewater Operator Certification Fee Schedule to determine the applicable fee by grade level.

21. How do I obtain qualifying experience?

- a.) By working in wastewater operations at a classified Wastewater Treatment Plant facility after obtaining a wastewater treatment plant operator certificate. Operators are given credit for each year of experience.
- b.) An applicant for operator certification who has acquired at least one year of full-time qualifying experience; at least 1,800 hours as an Operator-In-Training (OIT); at a WWTP may receive qualifying experience credit, provided certain conditions are met. ([See Section 3684.](#))
 - Applicants can make an irrevocable election to substitute sixteen educational points for one year of qualifying experience credit (may substitute for multiple years); however, educational points cannot be used to substitute the 1,800 hours of OIT experience. Educational points cannot be substituted for qualifying experience credit to satisfy educational requirements in the Operator Certification Requirements Table in Section 3687 for certification or qualifying for an examination.
 - Applicants who have obtained an OIT certificate and have completed at least one year of full-time qualifying experience as an OIT (at least 1,800 hours) and who have acquired 3,600 or more hours of Water Treatment experience while possessing a valid Water Treatment Certificate may be eligible for a one-time credit of one year of full-time qualifying experience.

- Applicants who have obtained their OIT experience (at least 1,800 hours of full-time qualifying experience) and who have acquired 3,600 or more hours of experience in one or more of the following areas:

(A) developing wastewater treatment plant operations and maintenance, safety, or laboratory procedural manuals;

(B) conducting training in wastewater treatment plant operations, safety, or laboratory procedures;

(C) developing, testing, and evaluating process control strategies to optimize wastewater treatment plant performance; or

(D) performing physical, chemical, and biological processes that are comparable to the duties of an operator at a wastewater treatment plant.

- c.) The WWOCP shall give qualifying experience credit for experience acquired at a facility that treats wastewater in a state other than California, in a territory, or on land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe, provided the duties are comparable to the duties of an operator at a WWTP and provided that during the time of employment, the applicant held a valid, unexpired certification of the appropriate grade level issued by a certifying body and the certification requirements are comparable to the requirements of the regulations.

22. How many different levels of operator certification are there?

There are five levels of wastewater treatment plant certification: Grade I thru V. Additionally, an individual may be certified as an operator-in-training (OIT) while gaining the knowledge and experience necessary to be a certified operator. A person can only apply for OIT certification at the Grade II through Grade V levels if the applicant has passed an examination at that grade level or higher and the applicant's examination results have not expired.

23. What type of tasks are considered qualifying experience?

Here are some examples of operational duties: adjusting gauges, adjusting dials and valves, adding chemicals, monitoring SCADA, reading and monitoring gauges, taking samples, and visual inspections of operational equipment.

24. How long is a certificate valid?

Certificates, including OIT certificates issued on or after January 1, 2017 are valid for three years. Certificates issued up to December 31, 2016 were valid for two years.

25. How do I renew my certificate?

At least 60 calendar days before the expiration of a wastewater treatment plant operator certificate, WWOCP will send a written notification of the expiration date to the certificate holder at their address of record; however, it is the operator's responsibility to submit an application for renewal along with the appropriate fees. As of January 1, 2017 the renewal certificates will be issued for three years. Failure to receive a notice of renewal letter from the Wastewater Operator Certification Program does not relieve the certificate holder from the responsibility of renewing a certificate before the expiration date. The application must be received before the certification expiration date. You will receive a new certificate within 30 calendar days from receipt of completed renewal application. Renewal is very important; as it is illegal to work as an operator in wastewater operations with an expired certificate.

- 26. What happens if I do not renew my certificate by the expiration date?**
It is essential to have a valid, unexpired operator certificate. Operators can't work in wastewater operations without a current, valid certificate posted at the Wastewater Treatment Plant. It is illegal to work as an operator with an expired certificate and by doing so operators will be subject to enforcement action.
- 27. How do I become certified if I did not renew my certificate by the renewal date?**
An operator has one year from the expiration date in which he/she can submit a [reinstatement](#) application with the renewal fee and a \$100.00 reinstatement fee to reinstate their expired application. The operator's certificate issuance date will be the date the certificate was reinstated. As of January 1, 2017 reinstatements will be issued with an expiration date of three years.
- 28. How do I replace my certificate (if it was stolen, lost, damaged, etc.)?**
According to Section 3702.6, the Wastewater Operator Certification Program can send out replacement certificates as long as the operator "submits a statement explaining the circumstances of the loss, theft, damage, or destruction and submits the replacement fee" of \$50.00.

OPERATOR-IN-TRAINING

- 29. What is an Operator-in-Training (OIT)?**
An OIT is a person working at a wastewater treatment plant who is gaining the experience necessary to become a certified operator. To receive an OIT certificate, you must complete an [OIT application](#) and pay the appropriate fees. After the application is approved, the Wastewater Operator Certification Program will issue a certificate allowing you to operate at a wastewater treatment plant under the direct supervision of a certified operator. Please refer to Section 3682.1 and [Section 3671](#) of the regulations for more information.
- 30. Must I have a job at a wastewater treatment plant to get an OIT Certificate?**
Yes. You must be working at a classified wastewater treatment plant for your OIT application to be approved. OIT certificates are issued to the owner of the wastewater treatment plant and sent to the attention of the CPO. They are not sent to the individual operators.
- 31. What if I am going to work at multiple WWTP's? Am I required to pay a separate fee for each plant and complete a new OIT application?**
It is not required to submit a separate OIT application for each WWTP plant, nor is it required to pay additional fees. For each WWTP that you will be working at, complete section IV of the [OIT application](#) (including the CPO's original signature).
- 32. What happens if I stop working as an OIT at a WWTP?**
Either request that the CPO complete the OIT qualifying experience form or request that he/she write a letter on official letterhead stating how many hours that you worked in wastewater operations including the start and end date. Keep a copy of the letter for your own records and request that the CPO send back your original OIT certificate and the letter. If you are applying for your wastewater certificate, then submit a copy of the letter along with your application.

33. What happens if I get a job at a different WWTP? Can I transfer my OIT certificate?

No, you cannot transfer an OIT certificate between WWTP's. If you secure a position at a different WWTP, submit a new OIT application with the new WWTP information. If you returned your OIT application before your expiration date, you may be eligible to use the remaining months left on your OIT certificate. You would not have to pay the OIT fee for the remaining time. Your new OIT certificate would be issued for the remainder of time from your initial OIT certificate.

34. How many hours do I need to qualify for one year of full-time experience?

Eighteen hundred (1,800) hours of experience will qualify as one year of full-time qualifying experience. Note: Volunteer, part-time, full-time and overtime hours in wastewater operations qualify.

35. How do I become an Operator-In-Training (OIT)?

You must meet the following requirements

- a.) Meet the minimum educational requirements.
- b.) Secure a position (either paid or volunteer) with a wastewater treatment plant.
- c.) Complete an OIT application
- d.) Make sure that the chief plant operator (CPO) signed the OIT application.
- e.) Make sure that you have signed the OIT application.
- f.) Attach a current duty statement on the wastewater treatment plants' official letterhead or have the duty statement signed by the CPO.
- g.) Include a check, money order, or online ACH payment with the appropriate application fee.

36. How much supervision does an Operator-In-Training (OIT) need?

According to the State Water Board regulation Section 3682, an OIT is required to work under the direct supervision of an operator with a certificate of equal or higher grade. "Direct supervision" means the supervising operator oversees and inspects the work performed by the OIT and provides training to ensure the safe and proper execution of the OIT's duties. The supervising operator must be available to consult with; and provide assistance to the OIT in order to ensure the safe and proper execution of the OIT's duties. An OIT cannot work as the only operator at a plant. It is illegal for an OIT to operate without the direct supervision of a certified operator. Additionally, an OIT will NOT receive qualifying experience for any time that he or she has operated without direct supervision.

LONE OPERATOR

37. What is a Lone Operator?

A Lone Operator is an operator, at a grade level lower than a designated-operator-in-charge, approved by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program to work alone at a wastewater treatment plant. An operator-in-training cannot be a "Lone Operator."

38. How can I assign a Lone Operator?

The Chief Plant Operator (CPO) of a wastewater treatment plant must receive approval from the Wastewater Operator Certification Program before assigning an operator as a Lone Operator. The CPO must demonstrate that the owner has had difficulty, despite due diligence, hiring a certified operator of the appropriate grade to operate the wastewater treatment plant. The chief plant operator shall request approval and shall submit a written plan that includes:

- a.) the name(s) and grade level(s) of the lone operator(s) and the proposed duties of the lone operator(s);
- b.) a work schedule showing when the lone operator(s) will be working alone; and
- c.) the procedure lone operator(s) will use to communicate with the chief plant operator, the designated operator-in-charge, or an operator at the same or higher grade level as the designated operator-in-charge when the lone operator(s) needs direction.

39. How long are Lone Operator approvals valid?

The approval to use a Lone Operator granted by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program is valid for 180 days.

PROVISIONAL OPERATOR

40. What is a Provisional Operator?

A Provisional Operator is an operator who is solely responsible for the operation of a **Class I** wastewater treatment plant. He/she does not have a valid operator certification, but has passed a wastewater examination within the last four years, and has received written approval from the WWOCP to possess a provisional operator certificate.

41. How can I hire a Provisional Operator?

An owner of a Class I wastewater treatment plant can apply to WWOCP to use a Provisional Operator. The owner must demonstrate that the owner has had difficulty, despite due diligence, hiring a certified operator of the appropriate grade to operate the wastewater treatment plant.

42. How long is a Provisional Operator approval valid?

An approval to use a Provisional Operator granted by WWOCP is valid for five years.

43. How long is a Provisional Operator certificate valid? Can I as an individual get a Provisional Operator Certification?

A Provisional Operator certificate is valid for a maximum of three years. A Provisional Operator certificate cannot be renewed. The Provisional Operator Certification application must be submitted by a wastewater treatment plant and therefore cannot be issued to an individual.

44. How much are the Provisional Operator fees?

The request to use a Provisional Operator fee is \$1,000. The Provisional Operator certificate fee is \$170.

DESIGNATED OPERATOR-IN-CHARGE

45. What is a Designated Operator-in-Charge?

When and if the CPO is unable to carry out the responsibilities of his/her position he/she must appoint a Designated Operator-in-Charge (DOIC). The DOIC is an operator appointed by the Chief Plant Operator (CPO) to be responsible for the overall operation of a wastewater treatment plant, including compliance with the applicable waste discharge requirements. The DOIC shall report to the CPO.

Each CPO and DOIC shall possess a valid operator certificate at a grade level at least equivalent to the following:

Wastewater Treatment Plant Classification	Minimum Grade Level of CPO	Minimum Grade Level of DOIC
I	I	I
II	II	I
III	III	II
IV	IV	III
V	V	III

46. As a Chief Plant Operator, am I required to appoint a designated Operator-in-Charge?

A Chief Plant Operator (CPO) must appoint a certified operator to be the Designated Operator-In-Charge for any period of time during which the CPO is unable to carry out the responsibilities of the position of CPO. The Designated Operator-In-Charge should be documented in the facility's standard operating procedures.

EXAMINATION WAIVER (RECIPROCITY)

47. What is an Examination Waiver?

The Wastewater Operator Certification Program may waive the examination requirement and the examination fee if the applicant holds a valid, unexpired certificate issued by a certifying body for a position comparable to that of an operator at a wastewater treatment plant, provided:

- a.) The experience, education, and examination requirements of the current certifying body are comparable to the Wastewater Operator Certification Program's requirements;
- b.) The applicant meets the minimum education and qualifying experience requirements for the applicable grade level;
- c.) The applicant has passed a written examination, administered by the certifying body, that is comparable to the examination given by the Wastewater Operator Certification Program for the applicable grade of operator certification; and
- d.) The applicant completes an application for operator certification and pays the certification and examination waiver fees.

ENFORCEMENT

48. What are the penalties for not complying with the Wastewater Operator Certification statutes and regulations?

Violation of the operator certification statutes and regulations are taken seriously. Depending on the severity of the violation, enforcement can range from disciplinary actions such as suspension or revocation of an operator's certificate, reprimand, probation, and/or imposition of administrative civil liability (monetary penalty). For more information about disciplinary actions and administrative civil liability, see section 2712 of the Wastewater Regulations.

49. Who investigates and enforces violations of the Operator Certification statutes and regulations?

The State Water Board's Office of Enforcement (OE) receives and investigates violations of the Operator Certification Statutes and Regulations.

50. A discretionary (disciplinary) decision has been made against me. Can I Appeal?

You may request reconsideration from the Director of the Office of Enforcement. For more information see section 3712 of the Wastewater Regulations.

51. How do I file a complaint?

There are two ways you can file a complaint of an operator's wrong-doing. You can contact the State Water Board's Office of Enforcement Special Investigations Supervisor at (916) 341-5891, or you can "Report Environmental Violations" with the California Environmental Protection Agency.

52. Will the information I provide remain confidential if I file a complaint?

The State Water Board will maintain confidentiality of your information to the extent allowed by state and federal law. In order to follow up on your complaint, the State Water Board may need to share the information you give us with other regulators or government agencies. This may include sharing any personal information you include in your complaint.

The information you provide may also be disclosed in the following circumstances:

- a.) In response to a Public Records Act request, as allowed by the California Public Records Act;
- b.) To another government agency as required by state or federal law;
- c.) In response to a court or administrative order, a subpoena, or a search warrant;
or
- d.) In a final enforcement action, if we need your information to substantiate a violation.

53. If I file a complaint, will I be protected against retaliation?

The Wastewater Operator Certification Program does not have the authority or the means to protect a conscientious operator from retaliation for their whistleblowing activities. These activities can include communication with the media, regulatory, or enforcement authorities, members of the Legislature, or environmental and special interest groups. Such activities are protected as long as the employee has reasonable grounds for believing that his/her information is correct. For more information please see <http://www.whistleblowers.gov/>

The Federal law covering whistleblowers at wastewater treatment plants in the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 507. The CWA states in part: *“No person shall fire, or in any other way discriminate against, or cause to be fired or discriminated against, any employee or authorized representative of employees by reason of fact that such employee or representative has filed, instituted, or caused to be filed or instituted any proceedings under this Act, or has testified or is about to testify in any proceedings resulting from the administration or enforcement of the provisions of this Act.”* Additional laws may apply.