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Licensed Water System Operator Environment Study Findings and Recommendations

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In 2021, the Drinking Water Program engaged Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) Solutions in a study of the Licensed Water System Operator (LWSO) environment in Maine, to identify opportunities for improvement. Many individuals representing a cross-section of the drinking water industry were interviewed to gain input on current issues and gather ideas for improving the effectiveness of Maine's LWSOs in helping to protect public health. The study reviewed aspects of the current LWSO environment that include but were not limited to:

- the division of responsibilities between water system owner and the LWSO,
- standard level of service,
- cost of services,
- owner knowledge of water regulations and requirements,
- contract standards,
- the development and use of standard operating procedures (SOPs),
- delegating required tasks to on-site personnel,
- preventing system negligence and operator negligence, and
- addressing the problem of "paper operators".

Findings, primarily related to small (non-municipal) water systems:

- Public Water System (PWS) owners are often not aware of operational requirements and regulations.
- The division of responsibilities between owner and LWSO are commonly unclear and undocumented.
- Operator contracts vary widely and may not cover the minimum PWS operational and regulatory requirements.
- Delegation of required tasks (such as sampling) to onsite personnel is commonly problematic with minimal training and without use of written SOPs.
- The desire to reduce costs can negatively impact the level of LWSO oversight of PWS operation.
- Addressing system and/or operator negligence is challenging, particularly with regard to differentiating between system owner and LWSO responsibility.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

- Continue to develop and provide fundamental training on PWS requirements and regulations, reaching out to small system owners, focusing on operator related responsibilities.
- Provide guidance and tools to define and document the division of necessary responsibilities between the PWS owner and LWSO.

- Develop water operator contract standards and/or minimum requirements. This may include identifying a minimum requirement for the LWSO's on-site presence.
- Provide standards, guidance, and training to foster effective delegation of required tasks to on-site personnel.
- Develop and maintain a list and description of standard costs for LWSO services related to PWS operation and emergency response.
- Develop methods, examples, and provide training on addressing system and operator negligence.
- Develop State Rules to support these recommendations.