



## Ashley Lucht: Assisting Communities In Creating Sustainable Drinking Water Systems

"Why does the solution always have to be more?" This question was put to me by Ashley Lucht when discussing the sustainable management of public drinking water systems.

"So many times the instantaneous reaction to news that there is a problem with a drinking water system is to resort immediately to a technical solution. So often managers assume they need more infrastructure, more money or more

capacity. But sometimes, the better solution is not more. Why can't it be less sometimes?"

Lucht's approach of conservation and sustainable long-term management has come to a shock to many managers who have become used to managing things in a certain way, or who may be a collection of volunteers with little experience managing a long-term resource like a drinking water system. "Historically technical assistance and technical solutions have been the low hanging fruit," Lucht explains. "The other pieces [managerial and financial solutions] have been tougher. I challenge managers to examine their entire management strategy. I encourage them to shift from a short-term to a longer-term focus."

Ashley works with managers of public drinking water systems, primarily in a consultative capacity, to help them make the best and most efficient decisions. "I help them negotiate regulations. I look at the long-term financial, technical and managerial facets of their management strategy and then I help them to find the best solution available to them." Ashley also is closely tied to the Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Program - a low interest loan program available to drinking water administrators to fund infrastructure improvement projects. "Funds are not guaranteed though," says Lucht. "I work with administrators to identify the most efficient way to deal with a problem." One of the things Lucht is excited about right now is a water efficiency pilot recently tested at the Orange Center School. "They were told that their source yield was too low, and that they had to find a new source to increase demand capacity. This area is historically dry, and they were looking at potentially \$100,000 or more for source exploration, testing and permitting. Plus, they would have to maintain that asset for the long-term. Instead, we looked at increasing efficiency in order to bring their existing usage in line with the resource that they already have." First, the state came in and did a water audit for the water system, which identified the type, age and usage of the system's fixtures and identified areas where the most water savings could be achieved. Once that had happened, "we changed out toilets and the cafeteria dishwasher to achieve the greatest water efficiency. Without changing behavior the school has been able to lower its water consumption by over 20% - and at no cost to the school (they were able to qualify for a grant from the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund) rather than the estimated \$100,000 necessary to find a new source", Ashley shared. "We also followed up with a day of water education at the school to drive the point home. Limited funds can spur creativity. It's exciting when you look at a problem from a different angle and it is successful."

I ask Lucht what she would like to share with our readers. "Tap water is a bargain", she says without hesitation, "but it isn't free. It costs a lot of money to maintain safe, potable water. I wish people would think about the value of water and what that value is compared to other things that they buy. An average household uses about 100 gallons of water a day. Most people pay about a penny per gallon for potable tap water. At the supermarket, that same gallon would cost a dollar. Clean water is an investment that every person benefits from, and it is essential to

human health. When it comes time to pay your bill, or to make difficult decisions, remember that value."

Finally, I want to know what advice Ashley has for those of us who do understand the value of clean, potable water. "If you aren't a part of actively creating solutions", Lucht counters, "you are a part of the problem. Don't be afraid to make difficult decisions. Clean potable water is popular. Paying for it is not, but the bottom line is that if we want to continue to have this resource available to us, we have to find ways to contribute to the costs associated with a water system's upkeep and maintenance. It is probably going to be unpopular, but don't be afraid to invest in it anyway."