

## **National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative: Helping Canada's Municipal Utilities Meet Today's Challenges**

These days it's impossible to open a newspaper without seeing an article that raises concerns about the deterioration of our municipal infrastructure, the safety of our water supplies or the condition of our rivers and lakes. Likely, you'll be concerned by what you read and you'll think about it – at least for a few minutes. Earth Tech's David Main is the Project Director for the *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative*. He and his team at Earth Tech think about these things all the time.

To meet these pressing challenges, Earth Tech engineers and planners have developed and continue to refine their benchmarking project, an innovative management process that is based upon the time-tested principle that “you cannot improve what you cannot measure.” The project translates critical issues such as water quality into tangible and objective measures to help Canada's public water, wastewater and stormwater utilities meet today's challenges.

36 of Canada's leading municipalities and regional districts, representing over 60% of Canada's population, have responded to the challenge by participating in the successful Earth Tech project. Awarded the prestigious 2003 **Management Innovation Award** by the **American Public Works Association**, the *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative*, “is unique among benchmarking projects and is one of the largest of its kind in the world,” according to Main.

Benchmarking is not new, but it is a relative newcomer within the public sector and other non-profit organizations. In the absence of the profit motif that is faced by the private sector, it provides public utilities with pressure to perform competitively to meet the needs of local citizens. And with growing maintenance and upgrade requirements occurring at a time when budgets are flat or even shrinking, benchmarking is a valuable tool for ensuring performance.

Similar benchmarking projects are being developed by publicly operated water and wastewater utilities around the globe. And many, including several in the United Kingdom, the USA and Australia, have borrowed from the methodology and performance measures used in Earth Tech's *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative*, due to its proven success.

So, what is benchmarking? There are many definitions. But generally, they include some common themes: learning, sharing information, and identifying and adopting best practices. It is the ongoing process of comparing products, services and practices with those of similar organizations. According to Main, “the ultimate goal of our benchmarking initiative is to improve water, wastewater and stormwater utility quality and performance.”

Launched in 1997 as a pilot project that included four participating cities as well as team members from Earth Tech and the National Research Council, the Benchmarking Initiative has

grown over the years. Today, the *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative* includes 36 of Canada's leading municipal and regional utilities.

David Main and Earth Tech engineers and planners from their Vancouver and Toronto offices work closely with utility managers and staff across the country to identify superior management practices. They start by developing measures that provide a quantitative assessment of performance. The results of these performance measures reflect a utility's progress on key goals relating to cost efficiency, system reliability, environmental impact, customer satisfaction, public health and occupational health and safety. Performance between different utilities can be accurately compared to determine best practices.

But Main is quick to point out that benchmarking is not merely a competitor analysis to show what your utility is doing better than others. "One of the greatest benefits of the *National Water and Wastewater Initiative* has been the sharing of insights and knowledge among utilities across Canada and through this process, common problems are overcome."

Main also adds that "Benchmarking is not a quick-fix." He stresses that it is a continuous assessment process that needs to be repeated frequently to ensure that a utility keeps up-to-date as the operational environment changes. Of course, a key benchmarking benefit is that, over time, individual utility trends show where performance is improving or sliding. And, if the trend is downwards, action plans for improvement can be undertaken.

A unique aspect of the *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative* is the way the data is collected. Earth Tech's expert team collects data through on-site visits in close association with key utility staff. This allows for data from different utilities (e.g., with different age and size of system) to be compared in what Main refers to as an "apples to apples" comparison.

The *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative* is now heading into its sixth year. The utility managers involved in the initiative have their hands full. The project requires an ongoing commitment to meeting the challenges that utilities face today. It also relies on a significant investment in resources in terms of time and energy. But the utility managers understand the importance of the project and the value that it brings to their operations. Their commitment to the Benchmarking Initiative has ensured its ongoing success.

For more information about the *National Water and Wastewater Benchmarking Initiative*, contact David Main at Earth Tech in Vancouver, B.C.

Write to [watergroup@earthtech.ca](mailto:watergroup@earthtech.ca) or call 604-298-6181.