



Anniversary Story

“Mending Wellhead Protection Relationships”

By Steve Kelley, City of Beatrice, Nebraska Water Superintendent, Groundwater Guardian Team

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The Beatrice Groundwater Guardian team was put together in 2006 to help protect the Beatrice water supply from increasing nitrates. The City of Beatrice had no zoning jurisdiction in our wellhead protection area and we needed to try and reduce the nitrates in our Old Wellfield and protect our second City Farm Wellfield.

The relationship with the farmers in the total of approximately 20 square miles of the wellhead protection areas was not good, which stemmed from a past farmer with no understanding that we all had to give and take to accomplish something. He did not have the patience to try and look at both sides before speaking and making decisions on water quality and quantity issues, which caused the water department to be the “bad guys” in many farmers’ eyes.

As Water Superintendent, I tried for several years to change our image without much success until we formed the Beatrice Groundwater Guardian Team. With the make-up of the team having a farmer, citizen, several Extension educators, NRCS, the local Natural Resource Districts, and myself we got our foot in the door of several of the farm operators. From here we were able to write three source water protection grants and got a cost share for farmers for irrigation scheduling equipment, irrigation well water meters, and soil moisture sensors. What a great way to mend this bad relationship!

We now provide an annual training on several subjects that address chemical use and irrigation practices. This is a well received training session, and in 2015 we had 32 people attend for this training, which is nearly two people for every square mile of our wellhead protection area! The farmers all appreciate the free meal we provide and most use the training in their farming practices to help provide a better income for their efforts.

From this farm operator training we expanded it to an annual urban training session. We have covered everything from chemical usage to lawn watering. We also touch on gardening practices for people to grow their own vegetables. This also has been well received by the urban residents. I have also received several comments from the farmers that they are glad we also are educating the urban people about some of the same issues.

From all this we have actually seen a slight decrease in nitrate levels in the Old Wellfield, and the City Farm Wellfield has not seen any increase in its nitrate levels. This is great for our system but best of all the relationship with the farmers is much better – they actually wave or speak to me when I run across them in the public. We also understand each other’s concerns much better.

All this has been possible because we started the Groundwater Guardian Team.

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