2026 Water Leaders Workshop Cathie R Eisen Walking Water Consulting

I am a New Mexico Environmental Department Certified Level IV Water and Wastewater Utility Operator with over 27 years of experience. I serve as the Chairperson of the NMED Utility Operators Certification Program Advisory Board and am the secretary of the Land And Natural Resources Advisory Committee for Lincoln County, New Mexico. My business, Walking Water Consulting serves Small Water and Wastewater Systems and contracts with three local utilities. I have worked in a broad range of positions including with New Mexico Tech, Bureau of Geology as a Hydrogeological Water Technician.

Presentation: I have been asked to give a brief presentation regarding the water systems in the Tularosa Basin and the challenges of the Certified Utility Operators who oversee them. I am sharing this perspective with you because these concerns affect all of us. In simple language, we cannot live more that a few days without water. If you are dependent on a community water system, then you are relying on the community leadership and the system operators to assure that you have a safe and plentiful supply of water for your needs. When you consider the challenge of having your own domestic well as opposed to operating a system that draws from one or more wells or perhaps even a river or lake to provide water to several hundred or even thousands of people the perspective is clear.

What are the key challenges? Supply of course, as we need to assure an adequate volume of production to meet daily peak demands. Drought, changing water levels, adequate storage and a dependable distribution system are all essential considerations. Secondly, water quality is also important. We have to assure that the supply we depend on is properly protected, free of contaminants, treated and disinfected to protect human health. In an area which is frequently impacted by drought, fire and floods there is a day to day necessity to monitor, track and protect our resources in the best fashion possible. Our role as Water System Operators also includes being prepared for these events. We develop Emergency Response Plans which include back up power supplies, alternate water supplies and contacts we need for immediate support. During a crisis we are ‘feet on the ground’, isolating leaks, monitoring storage levels, making repairs and often as not also being a liaison for our customers when communications break down.

We also need to consider the upkeep and maintenance of our utility systems. While it seems simple enough to pump water out of the ground and pipe it to your house, there are far more layers to consider. Infrastructure isn’t cheap and over time it ages and deteriorates and requires replacement. Qualified personnel are hard to find and rural New Mexico has a great shortage of certified operators, in part due to the low wages for the degree of responsibility the job entails, and better pay in the bigger cities and other states. When you add to this the potential cost of treatment to improve the quality of the water before it goes into storage and distribution, and the additional expense and effort to treat our surface waters, it adds up quickly. In parts of the Tularosa Basin there is also the requirement of desalinization in order to utilize the saline water supplies which would be otherwise non potable and unusable. The loss of the surface water supply from Bonita

Lake due to the fires and floods has redoubled that necessity and we have yet to be able to utilize that source since that time.

Along with all of this comes the requirement of maintaining compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act and the oversite of the New Mexico Environmental Department which is tasked with maintaining enforcement of those regulations. As Certified Utility Operators we have a unique responsibility to uphold these regulations while guiding our employers in that same direction. This is a particularly challenging effort. While the smaller communities have limited financial resources and often the most susceptible supplies and aged infrastructure, even the bigger systems have limited budgets. Equitable water rates and state funding support the function of these systems and the education of the community and leadership is essential. Without adequate Board Training and the firm support of the enforcement agencies essential repairs and upgrades often go unaddressed, making the Operators job responsibilities an even greater challenge. I am happy to be able to offer some further insight into those concerns today.

In addition to the above statement, if I am to make one other point in this presentation, I would offer this. I cannot do my job without having a ready supply of potable water to distribute to my users. In order to assure a sustainable supply for each and every community in the Tularosa Basin, and every part of the state for that matter, we need to identify, understand and develop the means to manage these resources in a sustainable fashion. Water studies and water plans are a crucial element in being able to determine the location of the available water and to access the quality, volume, and recharge of that source. Sustainability is also a key factor to this equation. Once we know what we have to work with we can then develop a plan to manage that supply so that it will remain viable for the present and future users. The Interstate Stream Commission is taking a strong role in developing a Regional Water Security Plan at this very moment. We all need to support that effort.

We also need to take one step further beyond the understanding and management of our water resources. The past several years have made it clear that without proper care of our forests and streams our vital water supplies are at risk. Drought robs us of the necessary recharge to our surface and groundwater sources when the rains and snows don’t replenish our supplies. Fires bring another layer of impacts and the ensuing floods add to those concerns. The run off from the fire scorched mountains and from heavy rains in general fouls stream waters and silts in the lakes they feed into, making them unusable for the systems that rely on that supply. We have to be proactive and manage our forests, stream banks, and control floodwaters when and where possible to protect the quality and quantity of the water supplies that they flow into. This takes additional planning and funding as well as cooperation from private land owners who also need to do their part. Forest and property maintenance is also an ongoing and repetitive effort as thinning needs to be repeated every three to five years to remain effective. Whether you have your own water source or depend on a community supply for your needs these issues affect each and every one of us, as well as all the future generations to come. We are all responsible for the effort to achieve the goal of protecting and preserving our most precious resource, our water.