

# Strengthening the Water Sector Workforce in Kentucky: GRADD's Hire to Operate (H2O) Program



February 13, 2023



NADO provides advocacy, education, research, and training for the nation's regional development organizations (RDOs). NADO and its members promote regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions to strengthen the economic competitiveness and quality of life across America's local communities.



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# Regional Development Organizations (RDOs)

The term “regional development organization” or RDO refers to the multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations known as:

- councils of governments
- regional councils
- economic development districts
- local development districts
- planning and development councils
- other local names





A dramatic sunset over a body of water. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds that are illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a vibrant orange and yellow glow. The sun is a bright, glowing orb just above the horizon line. The water in the foreground is dark with gentle ripples. In the distance, a city skyline is visible along the horizon, with several buildings and palm trees silhouetted against the bright sky. The overall mood is serene yet powerful, suggesting resilience and recovery.

# Resilience:

The ability of a region or community to anticipate, withstand, and bounce back from shocks, disruptions, and stresses including:

- ❑ Weather-related disasters or hazards / Impacts of climate change
- ❑ The closure of a large employer or military base
- ❑ The decline of an important industry
- ❑ Changes in workforce / effects of automation
- ❑ COVID-19 response & recovery
- ❑ Much more...



# RDOs Can Support Water Systems In Many Ways...

Because of their expertise and role as regional conveners, many RDOs serve as important players —though often behind the scenes — in supporting their region's water systems. These include:

- Providing Access to Funding through Grant Writing and Fostering Partnerships
- Conducting Data Collection and Mapping
- Supporting Regionalization
- Promoting Broader Economic Development





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# Today's Presenters

## **Paula Payne**

Workforce Development Coordinator, Green River Area Development District

## **Pete Conrad**

Superintendent, Henderson County Water District

## **Heather Stevenson**

Workforce Development Coordinator, Kentucky Rural Water Association





*Green River Area Development District*

# **Hire to Operate Program**

## **Water and Wastewater Workforce**



# Project Overview

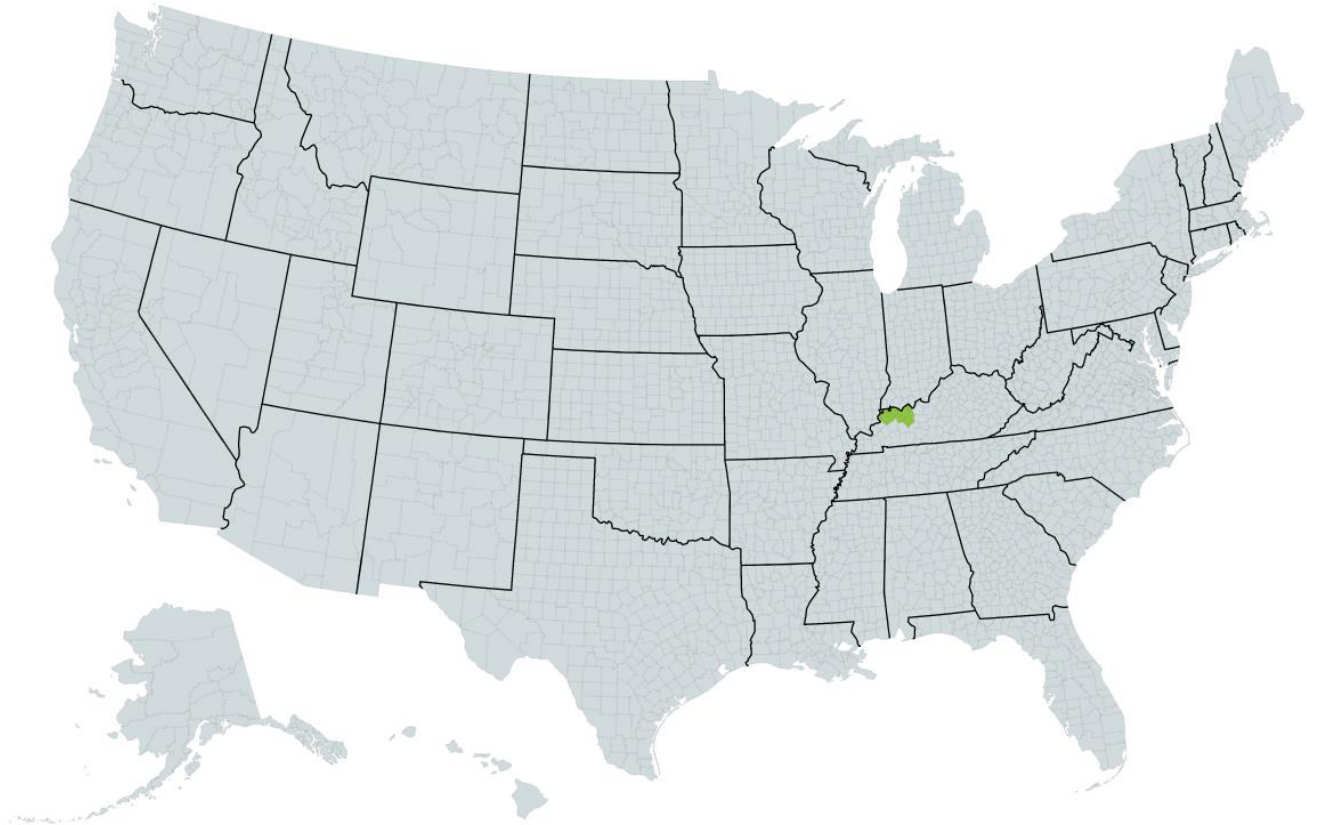
The Hire to Operate (H2O) Program is a collaboration between federal, state, and local partners to **address the shortage of certified water and wastewater operators in Western Kentucky** through a Registered Apprenticeship Program.

The program works to address a highly specified workforce need and **remove the cost barrier for local apprentices to become certified operators.**

The project **could be replicated** in other regions of Kentucky or in other states with Registered Apprenticeship Programs.

# Background Information

- The Green River Area Development District (GRADD) is a **regional planning agency and council of governments** serving the communities of Daviess, Hancock, Henderson, McLean, Ohio, Union, and Webster counties in **Western Kentucky**.
- GRADD **partners with state and federal entities** to fund and implement projects and programs that have been identified at the local level to **improve the quality of life of residents**.



# Project Need

- Availability of labor is at an all-time low
- Median age of Kentucky's water utility workforce is 55
- 56% of operators are eligible to retire now or within the next 2-5 years
- Barriers to replenishing the workforce
  - Inability to fund apprentices
  - Ability to pay a competitive wage
- Retired operators are returning to the water industry to fill critical need
- Meanwhile, need for water/wastewater operators is growing with population

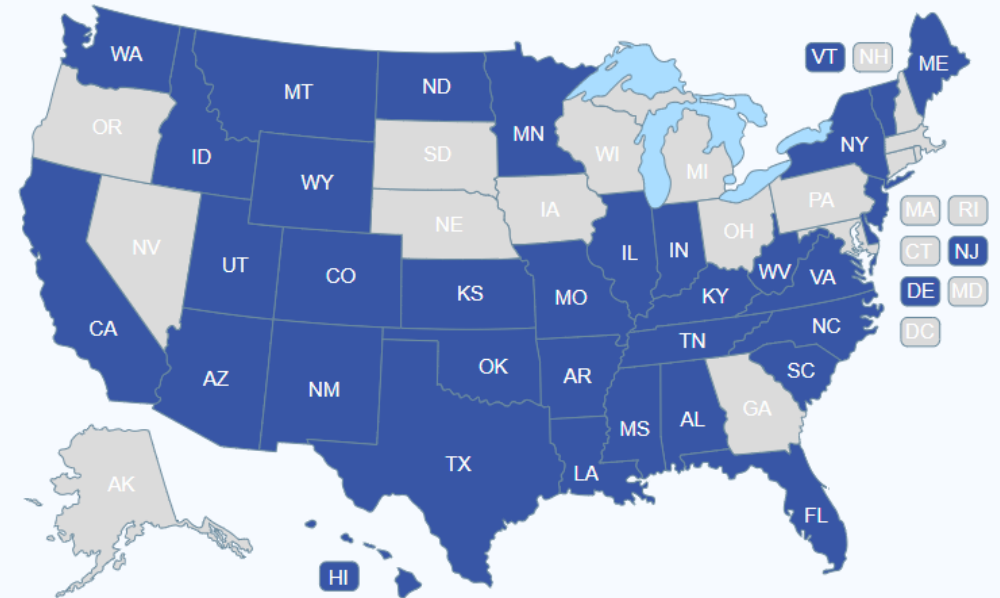





# Project Need

- On November 1, 2019, **revised regulations governing drinking water and wastewater operator certification** became effective and are jointly implemented by the DOW and DCA.
- While the framework formerly in place worked for many years, the **challenges facing the industry** made it necessary for the DOW and the DCA to review and **analyze regulations to determine needed changes**.
- The regulatory package was developed with input from stakeholders, and helps address operator shortages while maintaining high standards for operators in Kentucky.
- Changes made include **acceptance of state-approved apprenticeship programs towards operator certification**

*States with NRWA Registered Apprenticeship Programs*



**Map Key:**

 NRWA State Affiliates with Registered Apprenticeship Programs

# Project Need

- To address the need for more certified operators in Kentucky, the **Kentucky Rural Water Association** established a **Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP)** with the United States Department of Labor in 2019.
- The RAP is a **high-quality apprenticeship program** that provides individuals with opportunities to obtain **workplace-relevant knowledge** and **progressively advancing skills** through **on-the-job training** and **related technical instruction**.
- Apprentices are often hired without full knowledge or required credentials in their industry. The RAP requires apprentices complete **4,000 hours of On-the-Job Training** for approximately 2 years, along with **288 hours of Related Technical Instruction (RTI)**.
- The skill level and wages of apprentices are systematically increased as they progress through the program. With training and support from their employer, they gain the skills needed to ensure success in their new career.



# H2O Project

- Systems in the Green River Area struggled to attract apprentices to the KRWA RAP
  - **Identified cost as a barrier to enrollment**
- GRADD worked with local leaders to secure a \$150,000 Delta Workforce Program (DWP) grant through the Delta Regional Authority
  - Created the **Hire to Operate (H2O) Program**
- Goal of the program is to **reduce cost barriers to enrollment** in the KRWA RAP and ultimately **address the shortage of certified water and wastewater operators** in the DRA counties of Henderson, McLean, Union and Webster





# H2O Project

- The H2O program **utilizes grant funds** through the Delta Workforce Program to pay for:
  - **\$12,000 in wages for OTJ training**
  - **202.25 hours of RTI for each apprentice**
- The H2O Apprenticeship Program creates a **pipeline of highly qualified operators** for rural utilities and stable, quality careers for new entrants to the workforce, dislocated workers and incumbent workers at **minimal cost** to the apprentices or local utilities.
- GRADD has provided grant administration and oversight, as well as outreach and recruitment for the program.



# H2O Project

- To date, **three apprentices have graduated as certified operators** (2 water and 1 wastewater)
- Five more apprentices continue On-the-Job (OJT) training hours and have obtained various certificates
- All five remaining apprentices are **anticipated to graduate by late March 2023** as certified operators by the Kentucky Certification and Licensing Branch
- **All apprentices have been hired** by their respective sponsor utility



# Future of H2O

- In December 2022, the **Delta Workforce Program released a Request for Proposal** to solicit applications for grants targeted toward **creating a more vibrant economic future** for areas in the Delta Region
- GRADD will apply for up to \$450,000 to **continue the H2O Project** in Henderson, McLean, Union, and Webster Counties by providing OJT and RTI needed for certification
- Will continue creating a pipeline of highly qualified operators for rural utilities and stable, quality careers for new entrants to the workforce, dislocated workers and incumbent workers at minimal cost to the apprentices or local utilities







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