

## How To Select A Wastewater Operator

By

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When considering the selection of a contract operator of a wastewater treatment system there are many things to consider that can impact your bottom line. Competitive rates are important, but there are so many other factors to consider that could potentially cost you much more in the long run.

Just as selecting a partner for any other major undertaking, it is important to find a system operator who is a good match with similar goals, priorities, and management objectives.

Now if you are looking for a contract operator to manage a wastewater treatment system, you are most likely in one of two positions. Either this is your first venture (or should I say “adventure”) into owning or being responsible for a sewer plant...OR...you have an existing plant and are having some compliance, record keeping, maintenance or other operational issues.

Either way, you now need to select a qualified, competent operator and you realize that selecting the “right” partner can make all the difference in the long term operation of the sewer system. While many people in this position want to base the selection process on the proposed contract price (i.e., the cheaper bid wins), this is actually the last thing you want to consider when making your decision. The cheaper service can end up costing you much more in the long run! There are simply too many more important factors to consider when making your selection.

Be the issue regulatory....where an operational issue has lead to a moratorium or a permit compliance issue; or be the issue one of cost...where an emergency repair of a large magnitude will cost you much more than the few dollars you “might” save on the cheaper operator - remember the old TV commercial adage, “Pay me now, or pay me later!” Generally speaking, big emergencies are rare; more often than not, big emergencies started out as small repair problems that went unattended and were allowed to develop into “big” emergencies. Our suggestion: Go quality in operation; you will be glad you did.

Another issue...Customer Service...or actually, “POOR” Customer Service....can cost you more than just having a few unhappy customers. In North Carolina, an application for a system rate increase can be denied because of poor customer service or other negative performance criteria.

So, what do you do? First, you ask questions to help you evaluate a potential (or even your existing) contract operator! ...and here is where you start:

1. ***Is the prospective operator qualified to operate your system?*** Check with the NC Operator Certification office (919-733-0026) and ascertain the certification requirements needed to operate your particular system. Different systems require specific certification requirements in two specialized areas - Biological and Collections. Before calling the Certification office, have your permit number handy. They can then tell you exactly the requirements for your system and if your prospect meets those requirements.
2. ***Will your operator be able to manage ALL of the requirements of your system?*** Can this be done under one contract, or will multiple contracts be required to provide the necessary certified operators for your permit? "Back-up" operators are needed; and must also be duly certified. Are the operators backing up your Operator In Responsible Charge (OIRC) truly knowledgeable with the appropriate training and understanding of your particular system?
3. ***Is the operator a professional in the ever-changing, technology-oriented field, or is operating your facility something that is to be done "on the side?"*** This is very important. Is your prospective operator engaged in another profession and operating your facility as a sideline, or is he a professional with a track record of operational successes. Check it out!
4. ***Does your operator discuss cost of ownership, proactive maintenance life cycle costing, planned replacement?*** Is he willing to look after your long-term investment, or is his concern operating the system for today only? Does the operator understand the value of positive, pro-active maintenance, or is everything re-active. (You definitely want the pro-active operator!)

Your operator needs to understand the long-term, predictable financial management of a wastewater system. You want an operator who understands ownership cost management. In particular, if you are not knowledgeable with plant ownership issues, you really don't need an operator who has the same handicap.

5. ***Are reliable references provided?*** Check the references that your prospective operator gives you, and most definitely, follow up on them. It would amaze you how many times people put down references of current-past clients while all the time hoping that you won't call them. Also, ask to see a list of current-past clients and see who is "not" listed as a reference. Find out why!

Are they references that you can verify and trust? Here are some references that you definitely want to check with....those who regulate the industry!

While state employees can't make recommendations, they can answer questions. Keep your questions factually oriented.

Ask questions like:

- "If you owned my plant would you hire 'so-and-so' to operate it?"
- "Are most of 'so-and-so's' plants compliant?"

If the answer to either of these questions is "No" you might ask for an explanation as to the basis for their answer. Remember, regulators don't care about whom you hire, as long as your operator is professional, conscientious, and will operate your plant in accordance to your permit.

Taking a long-term approach to selecting your contract operator will pay dividends for years to come.

I do hope that when you need to look for a contract operator that you will take a look at Enviro-Tech. I am confident that you will find that working with our wastewater professionals will be one of the smartest decisions you ever make. We don't have just one product or one idea or one technology – we have a complete portfolio of solutions! Find out more for yourself....call us today.