

## President's Message

Dick Pantages,  
R.E.H.S.



## Ευχαριστώ

**T**his is my last column as president of NEHA. As I write this, my term is about 75% completed, so it's a little like writing my obituary before I'm dead! Writing these columns, especially so far in advance, has been one of the many challenges that have come my way as president.

As my term of office comes to a close, I'd like to thank many people. I realize that for some of you this may be boring, but it's important to know that this is a team effort and many people are responsible for helping the president do the job well.

First, I'd like to thank the members of NEHA. I've had a chance during my term and the 17 prior years that I've been on the board of directors of NEHA to meet many of you and to attend many of your meetings and conferences. I'm truly proud to represent such a noble and dedicated association of professionals. The job is not always easy; the pay will never make you rich; there is often little recognition for the work that you do; but you faithfully do what is necessary to protect the public's health and the environment. You do it whether it's hot or cold, wet or dry, dark or light, dealing with friendly or hostile people, and you do it with true professionalism.

Not only are you all a great group of professionals, but you're a great group of people to spend time with. I've been entertained, hosted, and generally been shown a great time by all the groups I've had a chance to visit with.

Second, I'd like to thank the NEHA staff. They are a bunch of truly dedicated professionals, too. They're there to help you. They certainly have provided assistance to me

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throughout this past year. That helps to make me look good, which is important, not for me, but because I represent you and the environmental health profession. The board of directors hires the executive director, and it is his responsibility to hire the staff. Executive Director Nelson Fabian will have been with NEHA for over 26 years by the time you read this. He has been a great source of institutional memory, and he has amassed a truly incredible staff.

One of the highlights of my term has been my periodic telephone conferences with Nelson. We have a chance to discuss the current matters that are occurring with NEHA, but we've taken the opportunity to philosophize (as old guys do!) about the future of the association and the profession, especially in these turbulent times. When we're not talking on the phone, we're exchanging e-mails. While I've been writing this last column, we've exchanged six e-mails so far! Nelson's dedication to his job and the EH profession are without equal. This dedication shows in the staff that he has surrounded himself with.

Third, I'd like to thank the board of directors for their support and guidance. The board is the body that sets the course for NEHA. I'm just the figurehead for the board. Over the years the board has diligently worked to make NEHA a better, stronger association. Much of what they do is invisible to the membership, but, believe me, it is sometimes very difficult work. Nevertheless, they buckle down to the tasks at hand. At this writing, our "big" board meeting in Denver is next month. The agenda package will be about three inches thick (although most of us will be dealing with it on our laptops, which are smaller and lighter than the hard copy of the agenda package!). The meetings will last two full days. We will all be tired at the end. But, we will still be working diligently to do the best we can for NEHA. We will still discuss contentious matters politely with each other, even if our opinions differ greatly. The board is a team, and we all pitch in to help wherever necessary. As you know, most people who are on boards are busy people, and are usually on more than one board—that is the nature of those who choose to serve.

In spite of the heavy workload at this board meeting, I always think to myself, as I fly home, that I can't wait for next year's spring board meeting! After this meeting, I will have only one more spring board meeting, when I am the immediate past president, and then, after 19 years, there will be no more of them. It may be hard to believe, but I'll really miss that! You are truly fortunate to have such a dedicated, professional group of people who serve on your board of directors!

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Fourth, I'd like to thank all those of you who volunteer to be committee and technical section chairs and vice chairs. I'd like to thank all of those of you who've volunteered to represent NEHA at the many forums to which we've been invited to participate. NEHA's fame and reputation have grown by quantum leaps in recent years, and this is due in part to the excellent people that we've had representing us.

I'd like to extend a couple of rather personal thanks to some people who've done a lot for me as a NEHA board member and as president this year. I'd like to thank Past President Diane Evans, who encouraged me to run for regional VP when she decided to vacate that position to run for second VP. I'm eternally grateful to her for getting me to run for a position on the NEHA board of directors, and once there, encouraging me to run for second VP, which leads to the presidency.

Perhaps most importantly, I'd also like to thank my wife of 40 years, Sandi, for all her support. She's probably attended more Annual Education Conference & Exhibitions (AECs) than most NEHA members! Most of the spring board meetings occur on the weekend of our wedding anniversary, and she hasn't fussed once about that! She helps me in a variety of ways too numerous to mention, including proofreading my columns.

So many more of you out there have helped and encouraged me; you know who you are, and I thank you. One of the problems with thanking people is that you run the risk of leaving someone out. I have not done this intentionally, and I apologize if you didn't get mentioned, but the list of names would take more space than they let me use!

Now that I've thanked those responsible for my being president and for any successes that I've had as your president, I'd like to take this opportunity to do some final reflecting and philosophizing.

In spite of the current economic situation, NEHA is well positioned to last the storm and emerge even bigger and better when everything settles down. We may take some financial losses, but, due to the diligent work of the staff and the board, we've pared expenses and we've built a surplus to help us weather situations like this. As I mentioned before, the fame and reputation of NEHA have never been higher. Although many of the manifestations of this occurred during my term as president, these things have been years in the

making. Patience and perseverance on the part of the staff and the board have allowed us to be where we are today.

I'd like to cite just a few examples of things that have come about as a result of NEHA's reputation. This last year, we inked a contract with CDC that lasts for five years and could bring in as much as \$1 million per year to help CDC with a variety of projects that they need to have done. For the 17th year in a row we've received an IAQ (indoor air quality) grant of \$250,000 from U.S. EPA, and this has occurred when U.S. EPA had to cut down on grants and grantees. Our AEC & Exhibition this June in Atlanta will have a large presence from CDC. The list goes on and on. The most important thing in these items isn't the money (although it's certainly important, especially in the current economic situation!), but it's the tangible evidence of the value of NEHA's reputation.

Personally, this profession has afforded me opportunities that I could have never dreamed of. And many similar opportunities are there for most of us. I've had the opportunity to develop a new procedure for on-site sewage disposal as the result of information I obtained at the first AEC I attended in 1974 in Cincinnati. I've had the opportunity to attend 34 AECs. This has afforded me the opportunity to visit parts of this great country that I might not have otherwise visited. The information and contacts that I've gotten from these conferences are invaluable.

I've had the opportunity to rub shoulders with some pretty famous inmates while inspecting detention facilities. I've had the opportunity to go to the Soviet Union, which became Russia and Uzbekistan when the USSR dissolved while I was there in 1991! I've also had the opportunity to implement several new programs: a local solid waste enforcement agency; a medical waste regulation program; a household hazardous waste program with three permanent facilities; and a single, unified data management system for my department.

I've had the opportunity to go out to a landfill in the pitch dark during a raging storm and try to find rat trap lines that seemed so easy to set out in the daylight! I eventually located the traps by foot—stepping around until the trap snapped on the steel toe of my boots. I've checked 20% of the male inmates at the county jail for lice. I've helped to exhume a body under the light of a full moon.

And, of course, I've served on the board of directors of NEHA for 18 years, including this last one as its president. I've had an interesting and rewarding career in environmental

health, and I didn't even know that such a career existed when I graduated from college! This is a wonderful and rewarding profession.

Finally, let me share with you some of my hopes for the future of NEHA and the environmental health profession.

First, I'd like to see a uniform national credential. By adopting the NEHA R.E.H.S./R.S. credential nationwide, we would standardize the profession. We would allow for easier movement from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In some jurisdictions, we would elevate the level of those performing the environmental health functions there.

Second, I'd like to see the membership of NEHA grow, but not for the obvious reason of increasing revenue from dues. I'd like to see the membership grow so that NEHA will have more influence (clout, juice, or whatever you want to call it), when matters concerning the profession of environmental health are discussed. The more members we represent, the more people will listen to us.

Finally, and this is my pie-in-the-sky hope, I would like to see us agree on one name to call ourselves. I believe that this would go a long way in helping the public, our legislative bodies, and other professionals, to know and understand who we are and the important job that we do. It will help legislative bodies see that the preventive work that we do can save a lot of money, so that funds don't have to be spent on "curative" work at the back end of the process. We can show them that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound (or a ton) of cure."

Thank you all, it's been a wonderful ride. 🐾

*Dick Pantano*

## did you know

The NEHA 2011  
Annual Educational  
Conference &  
Exhibition (AEC)  
will be in  
Columbus, Ohio.  
Check the JEH calendar  
for updates.