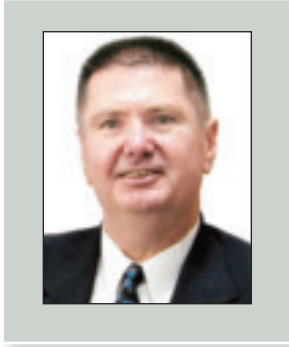


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Mel Knight, REHS

Conference Attendance and Networking Can Be Your Wisest Investment

I'm writing this column in the afterglow of attending the very successful 75th Annual Educational Conference (AEC) in Columbus, Ohio. It seems that no matter how many times I've attended NEHA conferences, I always come away with renewed enthusiasm and an optimistic outlook for the future of the profession and our programs. I attribute these positive experiences to being exposed to "the best of the best": the best practitioners in our profession discussing the best environmental health practices. In addition to personal growth and enjoyment, after nearly every conference I have been able to take lessons learned and apply them to quantifiable program innovations. With many programs experiencing budget cuts and travel restrictions, the time and costs of conference attendance may seem extravagant to some, but experience has demonstrated that the many benefits of participation for individuals and programs offer a positive return on the investment.

Case Study—The Positive Impact of NEHA AEC Attendance on the Development of the Sacramento County Food Safety Program

I was recently asked to cite specific examples of the value of NEHA participation. Of the many positive experiences that came to mind, my favorite stories demonstrate how NEHA AEC attendance benefited the development of the Sacramento County food safety program. This occurred during my last five years

"An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

– Benjamin Franklin

serving as director of environmental health for the Sacramento County Environmental Management Department.

A decade ago, Sacramento had all the problems and shortcomings typically associated with under-resourced environmental health programs: minimal inspection frequency, few educational offerings, and an outdated information system. This began to change when a combination of public and industry support for our programs created a window of opportunity for improvement. With the prospect of significant program augmentation, we sought out the best practices of accomplished programs so we could learn from others. In a period of a few years, the program went from average at best to being recognized as one of the nation's best, as evidenced by receiving the prestigious Samuel J. Crumbine Award in 2008. We clearly could not have done as much so quickly and efficiently without NEHA and our network of professional allies.

While directing the Sacramento County program, I had attended sessions conducted by frequent conference presenter and NEHA

Past President Pete Thornton. He described how his Florida program had sent staff on site visits to study other successful programs. Subsequently, I worked with our managers and supervisors to create a team from Sacramento that was able to initiate a number of such site visits. These visits focused on recognized award winning programs, first within California, then later to other parts of the country. Especially noteworthy was an early visit to Maricopa County, Arizona, where current NEHA Region 2 Vice President David Ludwig hosted our study team. This visit led to a number of program improvements in information management and scheduling efficiencies.

As our food safety team in Sacramento County was continuing to develop program enhancements, a number of us were able to attend the 2004 NEHA AEC in Anchorage, Alaska. We had plans to improve our public disclosure of retail food inspection results, but we had not been satisfied with the available options until we attended a session that included a presentation on the Toronto (Canada) placard system. Toronto had been successfully posting "Red-Yellow-Green" signage at the entrance to restaurants, with the placards disclosing not only current inspection results, but also status at the prior inspection. To somewhat oversimplify, the Toronto system is as follows: green placard = no critical violations; yellow placard = a critical violation detected, but immediately corrected; red placard = facility closed until critical violations could be corrected. Ron DeBurger (now the NEHA International Environmental Health/Climate Change Section chair) invited us to

observe his Toronto program, and the following year we were able to send representatives to Toronto as a side trip to the 2005 NEHA AEC in Providence, Rhode Island. We borrowed heavily from their well-developed placard system, and it became a popular and highly visible component of our program, which was later recognized by receiving the 2008 Samuel J. Crumline Award. Not coincidentally, Columbus, Ohio, adopted a similar system and received the 2009 Crumline Award, and most recently, Toronto was recognized with the 2011 Crumline Award.

Sacramento County made a significant investment in the food safety program. Thousands of dollars were spent on travel costs and registrations, not to mention the cost of staff time. In retrospect, these costs were well justified when we factored in the benefits to a multimillion dollar food safety program that ensures that nearly 6,000 retail food facilities are providing safe food to more than a million county residents and visitors. Many financial

savings were accrued due to the economies of building on the experiences and successes of others. Most importantly, this program is now universally viewed as a success by the public, elected officials, the retail food industry, and the highly professional Sacramento County food safety staff.

Return on Investment (ROI)

One of the major themes of this year's NEHA conference was *Return on Investment (ROI)*. As mentioned above, conference attendance can be quite an investment in both money and time, and it is important that attendees receive value for this investment. In addition to the networking and educational opportunities, this year's conference featured a number of innovations that enhanced participant value. My favorite ROI feature was the expanded access to the "Virtual AEC," allowing web-based access to many sessions by both attendees and those who could not be there in person. All participants can now "virtu-

ally" view or even repeatedly view sessions at convenient times via webcasts and archives, allowing "virtual" and on-site attendees to view more sessions, and even accumulate additional continuing education units, clearly getting "more bang for their buck."

Invitation to San Diego 2012!

I hope you will have the opportunity to attend the next AEC, to be held June 28–30, 2012, in San Diego, California. There will be valuable educational sessions and networking opportunities, and you can enjoy the many attractions available in my home state. If you are unable to make the trip, please consider joining the growing number of virtual attendees; while you will miss the great weather and beautiful beaches, it will be the next best thing to being there. ☺

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