



New Mexico Environment Department receives EPA grant for water utility operator training in underserved areas

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DALLAS (Oct. 22, 2020) – The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) was recently selected to receive a \$200,000 competitive grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The grant will assist San Juan College in developing and implementing a water utility operator recruitment and training program while addressing challenges associated with COVID-19.

“At the EPA, providing safe and reliable drinking water to communities across our Nation is a top priority. We also understand the challenges many communities face to fill important water-workforce positions,” **said EPA Regional Administrator Ken McQueen**. “EPA is proud to support our State and local partners during these challenging times with additional funding from EPA’s State Environmental Justice Cooperative Agreement grants. This grant will reach underserved communities and increase educational opportunities in New Mexico.”

“Safe drinking water is a basic human right,” **said NMED Cabinet Secretary James Kenney**. “Ensuring safe drinking water as a profession is a rewarding and noble career path that serves the greater good. This partnership will help pave the way for tomorrow’s drinking water professionals by investing in them today.”

“There are 40-plus water user associations in San Juan County, all of whom are required to meet water quality standards,” **said Dr. Lorenzo Reyes, San Juan College dean of Center for Workforce Training and Economic Development**. “We look forward to partnering with the New Mexico Environment Department to provide needed skills training to existing operators and those wishing to enter the industry.”

“With more than 33 percent of current certified water treatment operators being over the age of 60, it is critical that we replace retiring workers with skilled operators and keep our water supply safe,” **added Alicia Corbell, dean of San Juan College School of Energy**. “The funding from this grant will allow us to make our water treatment and wastewater management training widely available.”

The grant, intended for underserved populations hit hardest by COVID-19, will ensure more certified operators are deployed to drinking and wastewater systems in rural areas of northwest New Mexico, including tribal communities. The project is aimed toward recruitment and training for both those entering the workforce for the first time and experienced workers, including those displaced by the shifting energy economy. NMED thanks the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, which each submitted letters of support for the program that emphasize the need for utility operators in tribal and Four Corners communities.

EPA has actively supported COVID-19 response efforts across the country. As part of these efforts, EPA is providing \$2 million in State Environmental Justice Cooperative Agreement (SEJCA) grant funding to states, local governments and tribes for projects to benefit low income and minority communities disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic.

Nationally, EPA has announced the selection of nine additional states, tribes, cities and counties around the country that will receive up to \$200,000 for a total of \$2 million to help low income and minority

communities disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic. Funding will be provided once all legal and administrative requirements are satisfied.

Initially, \$1 million was set aside for environmental justice projects. Due to EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler's desire to expand the program to help communities combat health impacts that have been exacerbated by COVID, EPA selected an additional five grants to increase the total awards to \$2 million.

Through the State Environmental Justice Cooperative Agreement Program, EPA is providing grants over a two-year period to work collaboratively with environmental justice communities to understand, promote and integrate approaches to provide meaningful and measurable improvements to public health and the environment.

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