

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, GREAT LAKES, AND ENERGY
WATER RESOURCES DIVISION

**Board of Examiners
Certification of Municipal Wastewater Treatment Plant Operators
October 5, 2023 – Lansing (In Person)
Meeting Minutes**

Meeting called by announcement, dated June 8, 2023.

- Meeting was called to order by Brian Ross - 9:00 A.M.

Roll Call of Board Members and Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy Staff

Members of the Board

Brian Ross: Present
Louise Lieberman: Present
Chris Veldkamp: Present
Myron Erickson: Present
John Barthels: Present

Staff

Sarah Ehinger: Present
Sarah Marshall: Present
Alyssa Sarver: Present
Corey Velandra: Present
Earl Wuestnick: Present

Opening Opportunity for Public Comment

Chair Brian Ross opened opportunity for members of the public to provide comment.

- Sarah Marshall noted that there were no members of the public in attendance in person or online.

Opportunity to Amend Agenda

The Board reviewed the October 5, 2023, meeting agenda.

- Alyssa Sarver: Staff added an agenda item that wasn't included in the original draft agenda sent to members of the Board. Item 11, "Operator Reciprocity Process Update" has been added.

Motion to Approve October 5, 2023, Meeting Agenda

Motion: Myron Erickson
Seconded: Chris Veldkamp
Motion Passes: 5-0

Consideration of June 8, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Board and Staff reviewed meeting minutes presented for, June 8, 2023, meeting.

- Alyssa Sarver: There is a typo on page two, “Consideration of December 15, 2022, Meeting Minutes” should reference December meeting, not the October meeting.

Motion to Approve June 8, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Motion: Myron Erickson
Seconded: John Barthels
Motion Passes: 5-0

Applicant Eligibility – Advice/Appeals

- No advice or appeals from meeting participants.

Applicant Eligibility – Industrial/Commercial

- No inquiries of eligibility from meeting participants.

Applicant Eligibility – Approval/Denial

Board and Staff reviewed documentation provided by Staff pertaining to applicant eligibility with request for approval or denial of all remaining applications for the November 2, 2023, Municipal Certification Examinations as determined by Staff.

- Chris Veldkamp: Noted that it seemed that the number of denied applications was higher than normal.
 - Earl Wuestnick: It depends on the testing cycle and whether individuals applying for exams have the correct qualifications and education requirements. There are five applications on hold; one for course completion, and four that are waiting for reference checks with their employer.
- Brian Ross: Noted that on the drinking water side, the last two exam opportunities have had some of the largest applicant pools that we have seen which is a good sign that the industry is starting to be noticed and getting an increase of potential employees.
- John Barthels: The totals for a few locations seem to be incorrect, numbers of special classification applications seem to be very high.
 - Earl Wuestnick: Staff will make corrections for numbers listed under Gaylord and Grand Rapids.

Motion to Approve Staff Recommendations on Processing of Held Approvals/Denials

Motion: Chris Veldkamp

Second: John Barthels

Motion Passed: 5 - 0

Bay College One-Year Certificate Presentation – Troy Gallagher

Prior to Troy Gallagher joining the meeting, Staff provided an outline of Bay College's One-Year Certification Program which is intended to bring more people into the industry. Students would attend Bay College to complete a one-year program and, after they have completed their required courses, they will be allowed to take the Class D certification exam. If they pass the exam, they would be awarded a provisional certificate which will show potential employers that they have passed the exam, which will make them more competitive for employment opportunities. After one year of working at a plant, and experience/reference checks are completed by Staff, their provisional certification will convert to a regular certification.

- Chris Veldkamp: Who changes the provisional certificate into a full certification?
 - Sarah Ehinger: Program Staff will need to update their provisional certificate into a full certification. Individuals can take initiative to notify Staff that their year is completed once they've met the hourly requirements, otherwise there will be a yearly check to process.
- Chris Veldkamp: What is the responsibility of the Board in this process?
 - Sarah Ehinger: We're asking for a recommendation to approve/deny/modify the proposed program. We have the ability to accept alternatives if there are alternate ideas; you can recommend provisional certification to move ahead as proposed, recommend with modification, or not recommend it. Once receiving the Board's recommendation, we will bring that recommendation to management who will then determine whether we should move forward with the process.
 - Myron Erickson: It is a great idea that should make it easier to get a license and get employees hired into plants.
 - John Barthels: How would we deal with other entities that want to offer something similar to Bay's program.
 - Staff: We would bring the suggestion to the Board for review and recommendation.
 - John Barthels: This will provide employers with the proof that potential employees can pass the exam prior to being hired, which avoids issues with hiring employees for a year and then they are unable to pass the exam.

Troy Gallagher joined the call and provided a presentation on the program.

- Bay College has provided an two-year Associate's program for approximately 50 years now, and everyone knows that plants are struggling to find operators. We started to offer the one year certificate a few years ago, but have never had the approval from EGLE for those who completed the program to take the lower level exam licensing. The only difference between the Associate's program and the certificate is that those taking the certificate do not take the required general education courses of the Associate's program. They don't take courses in English, Math, Government, or Chemistry; however, they are required to meet baseline requirements in these subjects in order to enroll.

- Myron Erickson: You mentioned that certificate students wouldn't take Chemistry, but I saw on the list of classes that there were Chemistry classes listed.
 - Troy Gallagher: Students need to complete Water and Wastewater lab courses, but they don't take a general Chemistry course.
- Brian Ross: Would students who complete the certificate program be able to come back and complete the required general education courses and get their Associate's?
 - Troy Gallagher: Yes, we have a lot of students who come back to finish their Associate's with us.
- Chris Veldkamp: Are these classes offered remotely?
 - Troy Gallagher: The entire program is offered remotely with the condition that we have a city or municipal partner. Students take lectures online and we work with plants so that students can complete their labs there. Any operator that has six months or more of experience can come and take an accelerated version of the courses as well.

Motion to Recommend to Staff that the Program Holds Merit and to Develop for Utilization

Motion: Myron Erickson

Second: Chris Veldkamp

Motion Passed: 5 - 0

City of Grand Rapids/GRCC Proposed One-Year Certificate Overview

Staff provided a brief outline of the one-year certificate that is being proposed by the City of Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC). They are proposing a one-year program that will be modeled after Bay College. Their focus will be more on hands-on experience (1,000+ hours) while enrolled in the program, and less coursework than the Bay College certificate. The City and College would be available to present to the Board at the next meeting in December.

- Brian Ross: Would this require the rules to be changed to adjust the experience and education requirements for qualifying for the exams?
 - Sarah Ehinger: There is no one-to-one equivalency for work experience and education, so there may or may not be the need to change requirements. We would need to evaluate the real difference between an unpaid internship and a paid employee, with differences in duties.

Operator Reciprocity Process Update

Staff provided an overview of suggested changes to the operator reciprocity process. Currently if an individual applies and meets education and experience requirements, they are issued a temporary certification at the appropriate level and are required to take the next available exam and pass it. After studying other states, Staff are proposing that individuals coming from other states with equivalent education and certification levels can be offered a temporary certification at the equivalent level for them to be able to work at a plant for a year. After their year has been completed, Staff will send an employment verification questionnaire to confirm the one year requirement. If the operator completes the experience requirement and is in good standing, the operator would be provided a regular certification without need for examination. If the operator is not in good standing with their employer, they would be required to take and pass the exam as normal. This would require

evaluation of other state's requirements and exams to determine whether those states' programs would be equivalent.

- Chris Veldkamp: What role would the Board have at the end of their one year period?
 - Sarah Ehinger: We expect to see a greater number of appeals of evaluating reciprocity which the Board would then need to decide on, or if there are areas where we need recommendations or opinions in the evaluation of other states.
 - John Barthels: As someone that gets applicants from other states, it would be helpful if there was something that employers could look at that would provide equivalencies from other states.
 - Sarah Ehinger: We don't currently have other states evaluated, as they come in, we will evaluate. Then going forward, we might check to make sure requirements weren't changed, but would use that baseline as the determination.
- Louise Lieberman: I think this is a huge change, I'm uncomfortable without having an independent review of the other states. In the past, people have said that our program is very rigorous; are other states determined equivalent based on the rigorousness of our program? Why would people from Michigan have to retake their exam if they've left? Would there only be a single point of reference with their current employer?
 - Sarah Ehinger: It's in the rules that exams need to be retaken if their license lapses.
- Chris Veldkamp: It isn't necessarily what their experience was in their previous state because now we have experience with them in our state. There is a lot of room for employers to have reasons to talk someone up, or to keep them down. We can usually get a good sense from field staff whether the problems that a plant may have would be correlated to the operator or the plant itself.
 - Sarah Ehinger: We must operate on facts, and not opinions, so we would need to have evidence of whether the operator has performed or not. We would have to give questions that get to derivative facts. Field staff can provide a piece of the required information; however, we need a few different pieces from other sources that provide factual evidence of performance. These updates that we're suggesting are currently supported by the administrative rules, they just have not been in effect in the past. Even if the changes are recommended today, we have a lot of work to do. Management would provide the final say whether we can move forward or not with the updates, but we wanted to know if the Board agrees in concept with the updates or if there are other recommendations.
- Louise Lieberman: In the past, Staff has put together excellent programs and I don't see why this would be different; however, I need to process more. I would be interested to see what you find in those other states that you evaluate through this process.

Motion to Recommend to Staff to Move Forward with Reciprocity Updates

Motion: Myron Erickson

Second: John Barthels

Motion Passed: 4 - 1 (Louise Lieberman)

Request for Acceptance/Denial of CEC Courses

Staff provided the Board with Continuing Education Credit (CEC) materials for three recommended courses for review. The courses that were recommended included:

- Michigan Water Environment Association – PFAS seminar
- HESCO – Collections Festival
- Specific Energy – Basic Centrifugal Pump Hydraulics

Motion to Approve Recommendation of CEC Courses

Motion: Myron Erickson

Second: Louise Lieberman

Motion Passed: 5 - 0

2024 Calendar Distribution/Discussion

Next Exam Date: November 2, 2023

Next Meeting Date (Post-Exam): December 7, 2023

Closing Opportunity for Public Comment

- No members of the public were in attendance.

Board Member Comments

- Alyssa Sarver: The rulemaking process has started for collection systems facility classifications and operator certification requirements. The proposed rules were submitted to the Water Resources Division (WRD) Director last week. We are currently waiting for review of the documents. Once reviewed/approved by WRD management, the package will be sent to the Executive Office for approvals. Alyssa will work with the EGLE Policy and Procedures Coordinator to formally submit the rulemaking responses to the Office of Administrative Hearings and Rules. We are estimating at least a year before the proposed rules would be promulgated.

Adjourn

Motion to Adjourn

Motion: Myron Erickson

Second: John Barthels

Motion Passed: 5 – 0

Meeting Adjourned by Chair: 10:51 A.M.

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