



OPERATIONS CHALLENGE 2025



ACTION, ADRENALINE, AND AMBITION UNDERSCORE 38TH ANNUAL SKILLS COMPETITION

Justin Jacques with assistance from Steve Harrison and Jessica Rozek

Somewhere between a science fair and a gladiatorial arena sits Operations Challenge, the water sector's premier professional skills competition and the highest-energy attraction at WEFTEC®. Here, steel-toed boots and hard hats replace cleats and helmets, and for 38 years, only the strongest showings of speed, skill, and smarts have achieved greatness.

This year, 57 teams entered a storm of saw cuts and stopwatch clicks. They came from all corners of the U.S. as well as the U.K. and Denmark, each representing a Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Virginia) Member Association or comparable organization. Developed to test the full range of water-sector skills, Operations Challenge consists of five events: Teams optimize treatment systems in Process Control, analyze samples in Lab, restore a pipe section in Collections, repair a pump in Vaughan (Montesano, Washington) Maintenance, and perform a rescue in Safety. The field features three divisions based on experience level, with high-performing veterans in Division I and rookies in Division III.

Operations Challenge Community Chair Kim Furry noted that, in addition to hosting the largest number of teams in competition history, this year's meeting also involved more than 160 judges and volunteers — an all-time high. During a post-competition awards ceremony, Furry praised the “unmatched” talent and tenacity of this year's participants.

“Your communities are very lucky to have you, because you're such a dedicated and passionate workforce,” Furry said. “It has been my honor to spend the last 2 days with you all.”

Photos: Kieffer Photography

At Operations Challenge 2025, 57 teams from all corners of the operations profession tested brains and brawn in a series of five competitive events, each tailored to the demands of work in the water sector.

ELEVATED OPS SCALE HEIGHTS OF HISTORY WITH FOURTH OVERALL DIV I TRIUMPH



Elevated Ops, representing the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association (RMWEA) and Metro Water Recovery (Denver), achieved their fourth overall Division I win this year. Members of the team include Matt Duncan, Jesse Turpin, Joshua Mallorey, captain Kelsey Gedge, and coach Lance Wenzholz. Kieffer Photography

It was 10 years ago when Elevated Ops, representing the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association (RMWEA) and Metro Water Recovery (Denver), first tasted a big Operations Challenge win: the overall Division II trophy. The team of Matt Duncan, Jesse Turpin, Joshua Mallorey, captain Kelsey Gedge, and coach Lance Wenzholz celebrated their anniversary by scoring their fourth overall Division I win. Only three other teams in the competition's 38-year history boast such records.

For Wenzholz, hearing this year's results sounded like an echo of that first major victory.

"Every time we are called up to the podium — ecstatic," Wenzholz said. "It never gets old."

"Each time we win, it's special because of the level of competition and the amount of work that goes into it," Duncan added. "Success is not something we take for granted. We understand and see for ourselves the quality and quantity of the teams competing. Every year, the battle for number one intensifies."

This year, Elevated Ops notched a best-in-show score in the Process Control Event and the fastest time in the Safety Event. They also earned first place in the Division I Collections Event. Even in the Lab Event — historically, their Achilles' heel — the team placed fourth out of ten elite teams.

"It feels like every year, we're trying to get the Lab Event right, and this year was no different," Gedge said.

"We have the procedures down, but we always seem to grab a few unnecessary penalties that impact our finish," Mallorey added.

Published on September 19, an article in *The Wall Street Journal* featured Elevated Ops alongside several other Operations Challenge luminaries — an honor that is "hard to fathom," Duncan said. The article told the story of the team's longstanding rivalry with Controlled Chaos, representing the Water Environment Association of South Carolina and Mount Pleasant Waterworks. Before this year's meeting, the two titans were neck-and-neck at three overall Division I victories apiece.

However, as any fan of Operations Challenge knows, Elevated Ops and Controlled Chaos are far from adversaries.

"We feel fortunate to get the opportunity to compete against many great teams, including Controlled Chaos," Duncan said. "We get along well with them and share a mutual respect for Ops Challenge success. We know that they work hard, stay fit, and will be a tough competitor in any competition they enter."

For Gedge, his team's successful title defense was not the highlight of this year's outing. Instead, it was watching Donnie Cagle — "the GOAT [greatest of all time]," as far as Elevated Ops is concerned — win the 2025 Bobby Williams Competitive Spirit Award. 🦊



Competing in a field of ten Division I teams, Elevated Ops placed first in the Process Control, Safety, and Collections Events. Kieffer Photography

ALL-COLORADO DIV I SWEEP MARKS MILE-HIGH MIRACLE FOR RMWEA



In an unprecedented achievement, three teams representing the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association (RMWEA) took the top three spots in Division I. In addition to Elevated Ops in first place, Sewerside Squad from the City of Westminster, Colorado, and Metro Water Recovery's Double Duty earned second and third place overall. Kieffer Photography

Taking the stage just before Elevated Ops were two other Division I RMWEA teams: the City of Westminster, Colorado's **Sewerside Squad**, which placed second overall; and third-place **Double Duty**, also representing Metro Water Recovery (Denver). RMWEA's Division I dominance represents an unprecedented achievement in Operations Challenge folklore.

RMWEA is among the most competition-minded WEF Member Associations that participate — even managing the National Operations Challenge Team Resource Center. Devoted supporters for decades, RMWEA previously fielded the **Commode Commandos**, who won the Division I championship in 1999 and 2007. A contemporary iteration of the Commode Commandos competed this year in Division II.

Orren West, Co-Chair of RMWEA's Operations Challenge Committee, described RMWEA's approach to Operations Challenge as "iron sharpens iron," driven by a growing stable of top-tier local talents and "tremendous support" from utilities in the region.

Duncan agreed, noting that Elevated Ops relishes their many opportunities to compare notes with Colorado colleagues like Sewerside Squad, Double Duty, and the Commode Commandos.

"I think we all push each other to be better and ramp up the level of competition in the region," Duncan said. "The power of Ops Challenge to develop staff, network, and drive collaboration remains unmatched, and is definitely on display in the Rocky Mountains."

"I hope this Div I sweep shows the world that Colorado is home to some of the most skilled, knowledgeable, and dedicated water professionals in the industry," said Double Duty captain Adrian Quintana, who acknowledged both RMWEA and Metro Water Recovery for extensive encouragement and resources. "More importantly, I hope it serves as encouragement and a reminder of how vital this work is. Water is the world's most precious resource, and without passionate, hardworking operators who care deeply about protecting and managing it, we wouldn't have nearly as much to depend on."

Sewerside Squad achieved the best time in the Lab Event while Double Duty placed first in Vaughan Maintenance. Including Elevated Ops, RMWEA teams took the top spot in all five Division I events. 🦊

Also representing RMWEA were the Commode Commandos in Division II. Members of the team include Brandon Hinkhouse, Doug Rivera, Mike Cochrane, and Nicole Laurita. Kieffer Photography



DIV II TAKEDOWN RETURNS TEAM HRSD TO GLORY DAYS

The latest iteration of Team HRSD — Aaron Wheeler, AJ Dickens, Nicholas Lamprecht, captain Billie Swearingen, and coach Kolby Guse — took the top spot in Division II this year after securing first place in the Collections and Vaughan Maintenance Events. Kieffer Photography



Wearing the banner of Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD; Virginia Beach, Virginia) and the Virginia Water Environment Association, Team HRSD is among the best-recognized names on the Operations Challenge roster. Countless competitors have worn the jersey within the last 20 years or so, including 2025 Safety Event Coordinator Tim Scott.

An overall Division II win this year propelled the current Team HRSD — Aaron Wheeler, AJ Dickens, Nicholas Lamprecht, captain Billie Swearingen, and coach Kolby Guse — back into the competition’s upper echelons. The victory is a generational triumph for Team HRSD, who achieved their last overall Division II win in 2014.

“It’s an incredible feeling to carry on the rich history and legacy of Team HRSD,” said Swearingen, who joined the team alongside Guse and Dickens in 2021. Lamprecht suited up in 2023, while Dickens debuted this year as a full-fledged competitor. “We’re extremely proud of how far our team has come. The dedication, discipline, and drive of every member truly set us apart.”

While Team HRSD turned heads this year with a Collections Event time just under 2 minutes, the Vaughan Maintenance Event once again proved the team’s specialty. Their time was the best in Division II, and would have earned them third place in Division I. The team credits their performance

to constant practice, which includes recording every run and watching film as a team to identify potential improvements.

“Growth happens in those moments of analysis,” Swearingen said. “Every team member must remain open to constructive feedback. It’s not always easy to hear, ‘You can be better here,’ but embracing that mindset has been key to our success.”

If they return next year, Team HRSD will re-enter a Division I golden age, going hard-hat-to-hard-hat with the best in Operations Challenge. Swearingen described his team’s “deep respect” for Division I giants such as Elevated Ops and Controlled Chaos.

“We know that competing against established Div I teams will require even greater effort, focus, and precision, but we welcome that challenge and look forward to proving ourselves on the competition floor,” Swearingen said.

The New England Water Environment Association **Rising Sludge** finished second in Division II — winning the Division II Safety and Process Control Events — while the Water Environment Association of South Carolina **Surge** placed third overall. Top spots in the Division II Collections and Lab Events went to the Florida Water Environment Association **Fecal Matter** and the Central States Water Environment Association **Pumpers**, respectively. 🌊

ROWDY ROTIFERS TOP DIV III AFTER POWERHOUSE PROCESS PERFORMANCE

Despite debuting only last year, the Chesapeake Water Environment Association **Rowdy Rotifers** — Division III champions from Anne Arundel County, Maryland — performed like seasoned experts. The tuxedo-jersey-clad team, featuring Andrew Dwarshuis, Alexx Bois, Zachary Tate, captain Mike Smith Jr., and coach David Kramer, outplayed 25 other Division III competitors to take the top spot in the Process Control Event as well as second place in Lab and Collections.

“The Process Control Event closely aligns with our day-to-day operations across Anne Arundel County’s seven enhanced nutrient removal facilities, which include a membrane facility and a collection system with over 260 pump stations,” Kramer said. “Our success in this event is a testament to the training provided by Anne Arundel County.”

If Operations Challenge had a ‘Most Improved Team’ spirit award, the Rotifers would be frontrunners. Last year in New Orleans, the team barely broke the top ten finishers in any of the five events. This year, they took the podium in Division III for all but one event. Kramer said watching other teams succeed motivated the Rotifers to work harder. They built their own dedicated practice facility and resolved to participate in as many regional competitions as possible.

“It felt incredible to see our hard work and dedication pay off,” Kramer said of this year’s awards ceremony, noting that the team’s win earned



them an invitation to the Anne Arundel County Council’s office to receive recognition. “We will definitely be competing next year and are excited to move up to Div II. We are looking forward to the challenge and are eager to refine our skills to be even more competitive.”

Elsewhere in Division III, the Water Environment Association of Texas **TRAIblazers** won second place overall with first-place finishes in Lab and Safety, while the Pacific Northwest Clean Water Association **River Rangers** took third. **Team Blue Wave** from the Chesapeake Water Environment Association placed first in Collections, and the California Water Environment Association’s **SacSewer Warriors** topped the chart in Vaughan Maintenance. 🌊

Arriving at the awards ceremony in custom tuxedo jerseys, Andrew Dwarshuis, Alexx Bois, Zachary Tate, captain Mike Smith Jr., and coach David Kramer came out on top in Division III. The Rowdy Rotifers represent the Chesapeake Water Environment Association. Kieffer Photography



The Rowdy Rotifers finished first in the Division III Process Control Event. Kieffer Photography

MULTIGENERATIONAL OPERATIONS CHALLENGE FAMILIES BUILD LASTING LEGACIES



Allison Bennett, daughter of John Bennett, first saw Operations Challenge when she was 6 years old. This year, she helped with competition logistics. Kieffer Photography

Allison Bennett — daughter of John Bennett, former Operations Challenge Community Chair and longtime competition icon — still remembers the first time she saw her dad in fighting form.

“I have a picture from when I was 6 years old,” she said. “It was in Florida — Orlando — and it was my first time seeing Ops Challenge. My dad was still competing, and seeing him in action was always really inspiring. The way he leads, the way he guides ... It’s hard to talk about because it makes me sad that he’s not here.”

This meeting at WEFTEC was the first in a generation unattended by John Bennett, although the Texas legend called his daughter frequently

to get minute-by-minute details. Nevertheless, as Allison helped with competition logistics this year, she felt surrounded by family.

Along with those of the TRAILblazers, one of Allison’s most familiar faces belonged to Jeff Sober, who is both a former Operations Challenge Community Chair and Bennett’s boss at Garver (Little Rock, Arkansas), based in Dallas. Like the Bennetts, Operations Challenge is a family affair for Jeff and his father, Gary. The Sobers this year became the first-ever multigenerational WEF Fellow designees — a distinction that recognizes outstanding, career-long contributions to the water sector.

“I knew at 12 years old that I wanted to get into the wastewater business,” Jeff said, retreading how his father “paraded” him around to water resource recovery facilities for much of his childhood.

“Nowadays, I’d be in jail for child abuse,” Gary interjected.

“I think a lot of us have good stories of following people into the business, and it’s been a real honor to work with my dad and alongside him,” Jeff said.

It was John Bennett who first introduced Jeff to Operations Challenge. Jeff then, in turn, recruited his father. For more than a decade, the pair have become competition royalty both on the WEFTEC stage as well as in Texas. Jeff manages the Water Environment Association of Texas (WEAT) regional competition, for which Gary chairs the Process Control Event.

As Jeff grew deeper entrenched in Operations Challenge, his family grew, too. He met his wife, fellow engineer Grace, while promoting the program. This year, she returned for another term as a Collections Event judge.

“I met Grace at a WEAT event, and my pickup line to her was actually to recruit her into Operations Challenge,” Jeff said.

Echoing Allison Bennett, this year’s meeting hosted numerous young adults who truly grew up with Operations Challenge. Kevin Fleming, 21-year competition veteran and this year’s Collections Event Coordinator, beamed with pride at his wife, Jennifer, and daughter, Laura, who both facilitated the 2025 Collections Event.

“[Laura] went to her first event when she was 6 weeks old,” Kevin said. “This is her first time she’s been able to come back ever since.”

Jennifer has been involved with Operations Challenge nearly as long as her husband. In fact, she



Emma Schrader, daughter of WEF Operations Challenge Community Chair Kim Furry, volunteered during this year’s Lab Event. This was Schrader’s second year facilitating the WEFTEC competition. Kieffer Photography

helped Kevin prepare for his first competitions.

“He would bring home these huge binders full of materials full of stuff he had to know, and he’s more of a hands-on kind of person, so he would go through and read it all, and then he would read it all back to me,” Jennifer said. “So, I memorized the manual while he did.”

Emma Schrader — daughter of current WEF Operations Challenge Community Chair Kim Furry — supported this year’s WEFTEC competition for the second consecutive year. Their story was familiar: Emma was only 2 weeks old when Kim competed for the first time.

“Being here is amazing,” said Emma, who owns a salon in Delphos, Ohio. “I’m working on the Lab Event, but the Safety Event is my favorite. Some of this stuff may not make sense to me, but I love the atmosphere.”

“It’s so much fun to have her here, and for her to be able to share in something that I’ve been so passionate about for so many years,” Kim added.

Newcomer Emily LeCuyer, who competed with the Division III Central States Water Environment Association (CSWEA) Shovelers, caught up with her father just outside the competition area after running the Process Control Event. Eric LeCuyer — WEF Life Member, former CSWEA Executive Director, and late-1980s Operations Challenge veteran — offered a timeless tidbit of advice: “When you’re finished with an event, don’t think about that



event again. Start thinking about the next event.”

“Good, because I don’t want to talk about Process Control,” a dejected Emily said.

Matt Hargett judged the Safety Event this year for the first time, transitioning from years of competing alongside Union County, North Carolina-based teams that began in 2007. In Chicago, he cheered on his hometown Union County Predaturds alongside wife Melanie and 13-year-old son Jeremy. Asked for his first impressions of Operations Challenge in one word, Jeremy responded: “Hard.”

“I’ve been with Union County fixing to be 23 years,” Matt said. “Me and Melanie have been telling Jeremy he’s got to get involved with something that’s stable once he starts working, and we always joke around that water and sewer aren’t going away. Job security — everyone’s got to have it.”

Matt stressed that bringing his son to Operations Challenge was not meant to pressure him into the

Collections Event Coordinator Kevin Fleming this year enlisted wife, Jennifer, and daughter, Laura, to assist with event operations. The 2025 competition marked Laura’s first year of attendance since she was 6 weeks old. Kieffer Photography



Emily LeCuyer competed with the Division III Shovelers this year for the first time. Her father, Eric LeCuyer, competed during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kieffer Photography

Jeff and Gary Sober this year became the first-ever father-and-son pair of WEF Fellow designees. Jeff met his wife, Grace, while promoting Operations Challenge. Kieffer Photography



First-time Safety Event Judge Matt Hargett brought his wife, Melanie, and 13-year-old son Jeremy to Operations Challenge 2025. Kieffer Photography



water sector. He just hopes Jeremy will recognize the profession as stable, exciting, and “full of good people.”

Between Jeremy Hargett and Richard Rozek — father of WEF Manager of Operator Programs Jessica Rozek — there was strong evidence that it is never too early or too late to dive into Operations Challenge.

“Jessica’s enthusiasm for this competition and her job at WEF has trickled down through our family,” Richard said, noting that his other daughter once donned the squishy scales of WEF mascot Niles the Crocodile at WEFTEC. After following the competition from afar for nearly 20 years, the retired economist and lobbyist this year achieved a longtime dream of seeing a full-scale



WEF Manager of Operator Programs Jessica Rozek brought her father, Richard — a longtime Operations Challenge fan — to his first WEFTEC competition this year. Kieffer Photography

Operations Challenge in person and serving as a volunteer.

“It’s really special to be able to share this with him and to put him to work,” Jessica said. “He has become a huge fan of the competition as well as an advocate for operators.”

From all corners of the competition floor, the message was clear: The hundreds of competitors, volunteers, supporters, and fans who make up Operations Challenge are akin to one big family.

“There’s people here from across the entire country and beyond, and from every background, from every diverse part of the workforce, and we get to know them and help them be a part of this,” Jeff Sober said. “They become your family, and the Ops Challenge family is what keeps us coming back.”

“All our friends are here,” Gary Sober added. “It’s almost like having a lot of sons and daughters in the business.”

LETHAL CONCENTRATION, DIRTY BIRDS OF ST. PETE BOUNCE BACK AFTER HISTORIC HURRICANES

During Operations Challenge 2024 in New Orleans, while competitors swapped strategies and celebrated victories, two tables sat conspicuously empty.

Communities across the southeast U.S. were picking up the pieces from Hurricane Helene, which arrived in late September — a duty that forced Division I landmarks **Lethal Concentration** from

Greenwood, South Carolina, to miss last year’s competition. Meanwhile, all eyes were on forecasts that portended a second major storm, Hurricane Milton, would arrive just after WEFTEC. It was all-hands-on-deck for water professionals along Florida’s Gulf Coast, and the Division II **Dirty Birds of St. Pete** were no exception. Florida’s **Polk County Bio-Wizards** and **Fecal Matter** also were affected, forced to



The Division II Dirty Birds, representing St. Petersburg, Florida, made their return to Operations Challenge after being forced to miss last year’s competition to prepare for Hurricane Milton. Kieffer Photography

leave Operations Challenge 2024 early to assist with preparations.

The two veteran teams made their Operations Challenge comeback this year. However, memories of last year’s storms still loomed large as they dusted off the competition cobwebs. Deep floodwaters and deadly winds necessitated weeks of around-the-clock recovery work, and even a year later, reminders of the damage remain, both teams reported.

“We were working 12- or 16-hour days, and then you’d get off and go home, and of course, you’ve got no power, so you got your family there and you try to take care of them before getting back to work for 6 in the morning,” said Lethal Concentration captain Shane Gardner. Other members of the team include Bryan Weeks, Leigh Redden, Mathew Overstreet, and coach Tony Williamson. “It was like that for at least a week straight.”

“It was bad,” confirmed Dirty Birds coach Reggie Crockett-Wilson, surrounded by teammates Jayden Daniels, Antowan Lumpkin, Aubray Chevannes, captain Doug LaRue, and alternate Cameron Sheppard. “In St. Petersburg, we had to shut down two of our plants because the water level had them flooded and it wasn’t safe for our operators to be there.”

“There were fish swimming in our offices when we got back,” added Sheppard. Chevannes noted that many operators working at the impacted facilities lived nearby, and some had lost their homes.

Despite it all, the teams kept Operations Challenge in their hearts. Lethal Concentration fell behind on practice for a while, but rediscovered their

rhythm as conditions normalized. The Dirty Birds, too, quickly returned to their regimented practice schedule — every Thursday.

“It was a big issue for us, having to drop out, you know?” Daniels said. “We were really banking on last year to be one of our stronger years.”

While they could not compete last year, weathering hurricane season offered a different kind of learning experience, the teams said. Thorough and comprehensive disaster planning — before a storm hits — is key.

“If you got one generator, get two,” Chevannes said. “You never know what’s going to happen, so have everything ready to roll beforehand.”

Recovery after Hurricane Helene caused Division I mainstays **Lethal Concentration** to miss last year’s competition. The team represents the **City of Greenwood, South Carolina**. Kieffer Photography



SEWERSIDE SQUAD SHINES IN REDESIGNED LAB EVENT

Sewerside Squad, representing RMWEA and the City of Westminster, Colorado, achieved the best overall time in this year's redesigned Lab Event: **436.45 seconds**. Kieffer Photography



This year's refreshed Lab Event tasked teams with testing samples for residual chlorine and dissolved orthophosphate using new equipment supplied by Hach (Loveland, Colorado).

"When you remove *E. coli*, a lot of wastewater plants remove it with chlorine. When you do that, then you have to take back out the chlorine to ensure that you're not disturbing the aquatic ecosystem," said Melodi Clark, 2025 Lab Event Coordinator. "With orthophosphate, a big problem is phosphorus in rivers and streams, and a lot of communities are getting new limits for dissolved phosphorus. They're now testing for this on a daily basis to keep below those limits."

Clark said the new procedures were not unfamiliar for many teams, some of whom already use advanced spectrophotometers in their facilities. For newcomers, gaining experience with a fresh tool



Lab Event Coordinator Melodi Clark worked with equipment sponsor Hach (Loveland, Colorado) to redesign this year's Lab Event, which features tests for residual chlorine and dissolved orthophosphate. Kieffer Photography

is part of the reason WEF's Operations Challenge Community refreshes each event on a rotating schedule roughly every 4 to 5 years.

"Hach helped out tremendously during planning," Clark said, noting that the equipment provider played an active role in choosing testing methods that are both practical and environmentally sustainable.

RMWEA's Division I Sewerside Squad — George Schuhmacher, Ian Zawislak, Jesse Jones, and Lindie Aragon — scored a field-leading finishing time in the new Lab Event with 436.45 seconds. Although the Lab Event has been a staying strength for Sewerside Squad since their 2019 debut, this year marks the first time the team has earned the Division I Lab Event trophy.

"These two are just super-talented," Schuhmacher, who joined the team just months before WEFTEC, said of City of Westminster (Colorado) laboratory analysts Jones and Aragon.

"We think about those procedures so much in real life at our jobs, but competing is just something completely different," Jones said. "It feels so great to actually win the trophy."

"Our pipette skills are our secret weapon," Aragon said. "I can pour 20 mL in my sleep, and Jesse can do the same." 🐉

AERATORS, MANHOLE COVER COMING TO NEXT YEAR'S SAFETY EVENT

Up next for an update is the Safety Event. Safety Event Coordinator Tim Scott and Vice Coordinator Rick Hartenstein have been working hard to devise new ways to challenge next year's competitors.

"We're going to remove the check valves and the gate valves, and we're going to put in air diffusers," Hartenstein said, noting that specific procedures are not yet finalized. "Somebody's entering an aeration

tank, and they'll have to change the air diffusers out. We'll have a lockout/tagout set up on top of the platform, and teams will have to close the valve and then lock that out."

"From a maintenance standpoint, it's going to be completely different," Scott added. "Someone on your team will probably have familiarity with aerators, but probably not the whole team will. So, you might have to strategize to some degree on who tackles what."



The aerators, supplied by Xylem (Washington, D.C.), are not the only new components. Teams will have to remove a manhole cover on top of the platform — rather than just a netting — before retrieving the dummy that represents an unconscious worker. Hartenstein described that the manhole cover features two handles and is made from 0.6-cm (0.25-in.) diamond-plated steel: built for sturdiness without being too heavy to move.

Chris Tikker of the California Water Environment Association **SacSewer Warriors** inspected a model manhole cover near this year's Safety Event setup. He said lifting the cover seemed manageable, but he was surprised by its weight.

"The grate next year might not be a one-man operation," Tikker said. "It's going to depend on the rules they put on it and whether they let us use any tools. It's definitely going to be a new thing to factor into our practices." 🐉



Next year's redesigned Safety Event will feature new aerators as well as a manhole cover on top of the platform rather than a netting. The rescue operation likely will remain unchanged. Kieffer Photography

Safety Event Coordinator Tim Scott and Vice Coordinator Rich Hartenstein described that the refreshed event will force teams to reassess their approach in order to remain competitive. Kieffer Photography

ANGEL FRENCH PURSUES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH MILITARY RIGOR

Angel French, 5-year New York Water Environment Association **Water Bears** competitor, has had a busy year.

While preparing for Operations Challenge, French also was a student in the 2025 cohort of WEF's Water Leadership Institute (WLI) program — an intensive, 6-month seminar that provides management training and leadership development tailored to the water sector. Working with a cross-cutting team of classmates, French completed a WLI capstone project focused on the concept of

resilient leadership, specifically as it pertains to water rights. She presented the project at WEFTEC.

"Resilient leadership, to me, is a leader that has the ability to motivate their crew and keep them growing so that they can eventually replace the current leaders," French said.

French approaches her work as Chief Operator for the City of Watertown Pollution Control Facility with a similar discipline as she approached her service as a Naval Nuclear Machinist Mate for the U.S. Navy, working in the engine rooms of advanced vessels. She

Angel French, former Naval Nuclear Machinist Mate for the U.S. Navy and Operations Challenge competitor with the New York Water Environment Association Water Bears, this year completed WEF's Water Leadership Institute program.
Kieffer Photography




sees considerable overlap between the two roles.

“All we did was pumps and valves and chemistry, just like in wastewater,” French said. “When I found my job, I fell in love with it. Everyone should know about this job, because of the variety in our field of work and how much we’re doing for the environment.”

Spreading the word was French's main motivation behind participating in WLI.

“I want to do more public outreach,” she said. “I want more of the people in our communities to actually know what’s going on at their wastewater plant. As a leader, that puts the ownership on you.”

Next year, a new scholarship program will sponsor WLI tuition fees for two Operations Challenge competitors, coaches, or volunteers. The application period for the 2026 WLI cohort is open through January 15, 2026. Get details at www.wef.org/wli. 

IWEA PRESIDENT LYNN KOHLHAAS ENTERS DIV I WITH HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE

Second City Sewer Crew, representing the Illinois Water Environment Association (IWEA) and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD),



Lynn Kohlhaas of Chicago's hometown Second City Sewer Crew made her Division I debut this year alongside her team, John Kargbo, Dave Garza, and Thomas Sinickas. This year also marked the beginning of Kohlhaas' term as President of the Illinois Water Environment Association. Kieffer Photography

enjoyed home-field advantage for their Division I debut this year.

"I've been telling everybody it's like the high-school championship football team gets to play in the NFL [National Football League]," said captain Lynn Kohlhaas, MWRD Principal Engineer. Her team included John Kargbo, Dave Garza, and Thomas Sinickas, as well as coaches Matt McGregor and Conor Heffernan. "These Div I teams are phenomenal, and we just want to show up and not embarrass ourselves."

This year began Kohlhaas' inaugural term as IWEA President. Between practices for Operations Challenge, she spent her year strengthening outreach toward operators in more rural parts of Illinois while improving IWEA's training offerings.

“My priorities this year are very much membership-focused: Grow our membership, grow our brand, our identity,” Kohlhaas said. “We’re really trying to pull in rural operators as much as possible for opportunities when we can.”

MWRD'S STICKNEY FACILITY HOSTS TRAINING SESSION FOR INTERNATIONAL TEAMS

In the Saturday before Operations Challenge began, **Second City Sewer Crew** and **Lethal Concentration** hosted a personalized training session for this year's two international teams: **The Great Danes**, representing Aarhus Vand (Viby J, Denmark), and the **Severn Trenters**, representing

Severn Trent (Birmingham, England).

The session took place at MWRD's Stickney Water Reclamation Plant. Sized to process up to 5.45 billion L/d (1.44 billion gal/d), it is among the world's largest water resource recovery facilities.

"The size of it — I can't comprehend it," said

Great Danes captain Gustav Terp. "What they treat in one day is like what we treat in a whole year."


Terp, joined by teammates Anita Tittanen, Martin Larsen, Michael Augustenbourg, and coach Magnus Hansen, praised the hands-on coaching his team received from the Division I veterans.

“We each had our own coach, and having them talk us through each step of the exercises gave us a lot of good advice,” he said.

“We were a lot happier after practicing with the elite teams,” echoed Lauren Houghton of the Severn Trenters. Her teammates included Charles Myatt, Harry Henson, Will Harden, and coach Matt Cope.



The two international teams at Operations Challenge 2025 — the Great Danes from Denmark and the Severn Trenters from England — attended an intensive training session coached by veteran teams Second City Sewer Crew and Lethal Concentration just before the competition began.

“The first time the team touched most of the equipment was at the training, and they did really, really, really well,” Cope said. “Everybody’s been just so helpful. They’re really patient with us.” 

WAUBONSEE STUDENTS WATCH WATER'S TOP TALENTS IN ACTION

Within a sea of cheering fans, a student group from Waubensee Community College (WCC; Sugar Grove, Illinois) watched the unique spectacle that is Operations Challenge in awe.

With 20 out of 26 students over age 25 and four over age 50, they came from all backgrounds and experience levels — much like the competitors themselves. Accompanying them was Sheela Vemu, one of a handful of instructors teaching WCC's new, six-course Water and Wastewater Technology Certificate Program. The program, funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, aims to create a pathway for locals to earn their state drinking water and wastewater operator certifications.

“We’re focused on employability,” Vemu said. “The skills our students are looking to build can be leveraged in other areas. If they learn the water skill sets, they can do environmental work, policy, microbiology ...”

In developing the program's coursework, Vemu and her colleagues scoured technical materials from WEF and the American Water Works Association



The inaugural class of Waubensee Community College (Sugar Grove, Illinois) Water and Wastewater Technology Certificate Program students attended Operations Challenge for an up-close look at the sector's top operations talents. They gained perspective from Craig Hennager, who ran a similar operator training program in Des Moines, Iowa.

(Denver) to identify hundreds of specific skills students would have to learn to excel in the water sector. Vemu's students are up to the challenge, she said.

“Upskilling, career trajectory, mastery — these are some things our students are thinking about,” Vemu said. “What I learn from watching these students is that excitement and enthusiasm have no age. When I walk into the classroom, I get that same excitement you see when you walk into a room full of freshmen or sophomores.”

Learn more about the certificate program at www.waubonsee.edu/water. 