

Amid Drought, a Wellspring of Irrigation Training Tools



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Two years ago, it was Texas. Now, it's California. Who knows where it will hit next? The extreme drought that has plagued the western U.S.—coupled with the continued growth of public and private sustainability initiatives—has sparked unprecedented awareness of water-use issues.

On the private side, both commercial and residential landowners are concerned about keeping their water bills in check. And public entities bear the responsibility for protecting water quality and quantity. In short, people everywhere are looking for new ways of using less water. And irrigation efficiency tops the solutions list for many.

The human factor

This growing awareness of water use has led to changes in the way irrigation professionals are trained and the certification options available to them. Central to irrigation certification trends are the new water-efficient landscape regulations taking effect in many locations. Compliance with these regulations often implies or demands that property owners hire certified landscape irrigation professionals.

Much more so than in many other areas of sustainability, the success of irrigation initiatives depends largely upon the human factor. Although improved irrigation technologies have their place, management is key, stresses Gregory Plumb, water agency programs specialist with [Qualified Water Efficient Landscaper](#), a regional landscape irrigation certification program serving California and several other western states. "Someone has to make sure what is happening is sensible," Plumb says. "Everything else is bells and whistles. Technology without maintenance and management is pretty much useless, to be frank."

When the Environmental Protection Agency's [WaterSense](#) program was born, the agency realized it needed to recognize irrigation individuals as well as technologies, adds John R. Farner, government and public affairs director of the [Irrigation Association](#). "There are so many human factors associated with how an irrigation system is maintained and run," he says. "The federal government realized it needed to promote certification for landscape professionals. Whether through state or local mandates or voluntary incentives, there is greater demand than ever for certified individuals."

Certification benefits

While estimating the percentage of certified landscape irrigation professionals is difficult, most certifiers agree that the number is still small. However, the benefits of certification are becoming hard to deny for many contractors. In addition to meeting eligibility requirements for an increasing number of jobs, certification can be a valuable marketing tool, helping to distinguish certified contractors from their competitors. Some certifiers actively promote their graduates in the marketplace and through networking with other organizations.

Certification also offers a way for landscaping companies to ensure they are providing a consistent standard of quality to their customers. In the past, only high-level employees such as irrigation designers typically pursued certification. And it was common for only one or a few employees per company to get certified. That is changing.

Certification types

Now, certification options exist at all levels. For example, in response to requests from water providers, government agencies and other organizations, the Irrigation Association recently added a certification for field employees: certified irrigation technician. "There was a void out there to certify these types of individuals," Farner explains. "We've tried to create a suite of certifications to meet the demands of the industry. From technician to contractor or designer, regardless of where you fit in the industry, there is a certification out there for you. There are always more education opportunities to take advantage of to improve your performance on the job."

Specialized training and certification are available in a number of irrigation areas. For example, in addition to the irrigation technician training, the Irrigation Association offers certification in landscape irrigation auditing, irrigation design and water management as well as a certified irrigation designer designation.

Plumb stresses that training all levels of employees can help improve the overall quality of service a landscape company offers. "Inevitably, everyone who works for a landscape company is going to come into contact with irrigation," he says. "Having some baseline training is helpful so employees in the field can recognize and address issues when they see them, even if it's just telling someone about it."

Depending on their location, contractors may have access to multiple certification programs. These may be offered through various organizations, including water providers, colleges and universities, certifying bodies such as the [Irrigation Association](#) or a combination of the above. Because irrigation practices can vary from one region to the next, it is common for national or regional certification programs to partner with local organizations. That way, participants receive standardized training in best practices along with specialized knowledge of local conditions.

Courses may be free or as much as several thousand dollars. Typically, continuing education credits are required each year to maintain certification. These can be earned in various ways, from completing irrigation audits to attending workshops or even online classes.

Certification vs. training

While many landscape contractors have wholeheartedly embraced the certification model, not all are thrilled about it. Jessyca Frederick, CEO of [Water Wise Now](#), a landscape irrigation firm headquartered in La Quinta, California, objects to the cost of certification and worries that increasing pressure to certify employees may put smaller companies at a disadvantage.

“Most of the irrigation industry is not big companies—it’s mom-and-pop companies. The expense of certification is extremely hard on the little guy,” she says. “I think we need to distinguish between education and certification. Certifications just prove we know what we say we know. From a customer standpoint, there’s value in saving water but not in calling yourself certified. Not being certified has never been an issue with a customer. I prefer the ‘educate the customer’ approach. I want to see people’s water bills go down. That’s my goal.”

That said, Frederick and her business partner have reluctantly decided to pursue WaterSense certification to qualify for the increasing number of irrigation jobs that are only available to certified professionals.

When choosing between certification programs, the contractor should decide based on his or her primary goal as well as budget. If, like Frederick, the purpose is to qualify for jobs that require certification, care should be taken to choose the appropriate certifications—usually WaterSense-approved programs. However, if education is the primary goal, lower-cost options may be the best bet, especially for smaller operations or when large numbers of employees need training.

Room for improvement

Although awareness of smart water use is on the rise because of the highly publicized drought in the West, there is still plenty of room for improvement for contractors installing and maintaining irrigation systems, as well as educating their customers on proper landscape watering. For example, the EPA estimates that as much as 50 percent of water used for irrigation is wasted because of inefficient irrigation methods and systems. This translates into plenty of opportunity for landscape professionals. Whether it’s providing

training in irrigation best practices to all employees or attaining advanced certification for one or more upper-level employees to qualify for jobs requiring certified professionals, nearly every landscape company can stand to benefit from the growing number of irrigation certification and training options available today.

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