

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND CROSS-BORDER KNOWLEDGE SHARING

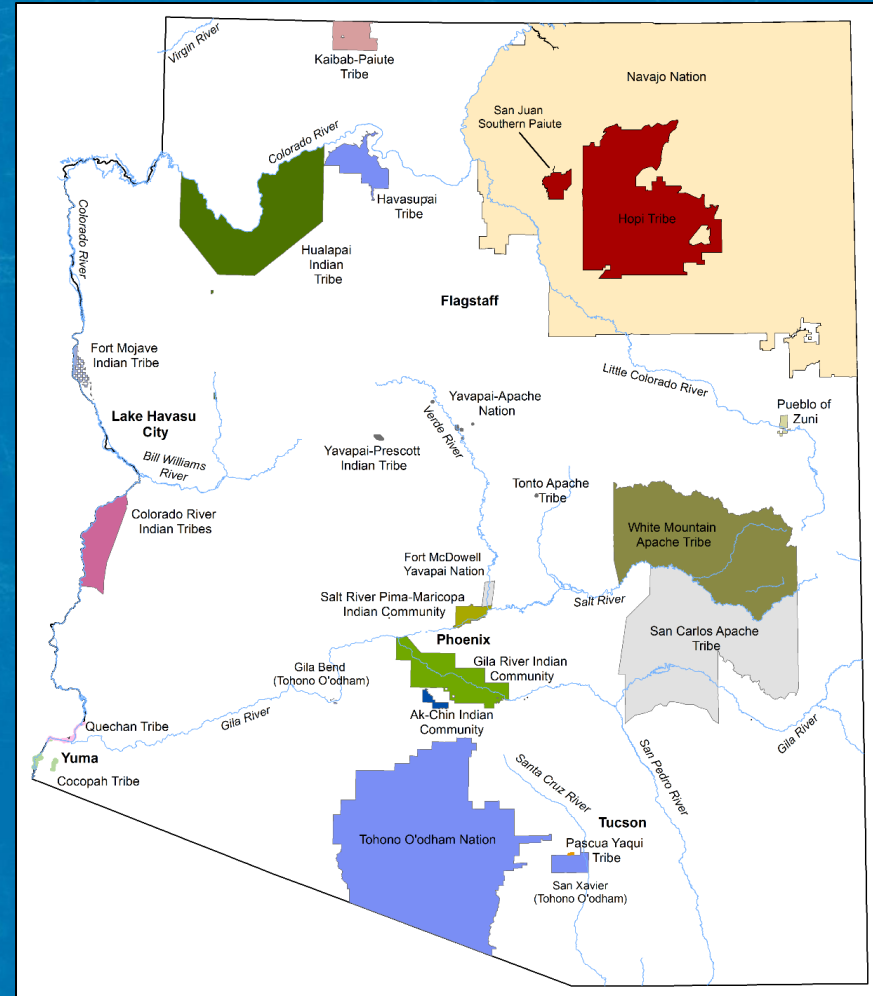


May 21, 2025



INTER TRIBAL COUNCIL OF ARIZONA

- Established in 1952
 - One of the first regional inter tribal associations created in the United States
 - Established By Tribes, For Tribes
 - Highest elected officials of 21 Member Tribes serve on the Council
- Mission
 - To take action on matters that affect them collectively and individually
 - To promote tribal sovereignty and strengthen tribal governments



INTER TRIBAL COUNCIL OF ARIZONA

- Established a non-profit organization in 1975
 - Authorized by Member Tribes to administer programs and services on their behalf
 - Tribal needs to be addressed are identified through members on the Council
 - Manages over 30 programs and employs over 70 staff





Focus of this presentation

Shared Border: **Water Utilities Workforce
and Operator Certification**

Shared Border: **Reciprocity and Regulations**

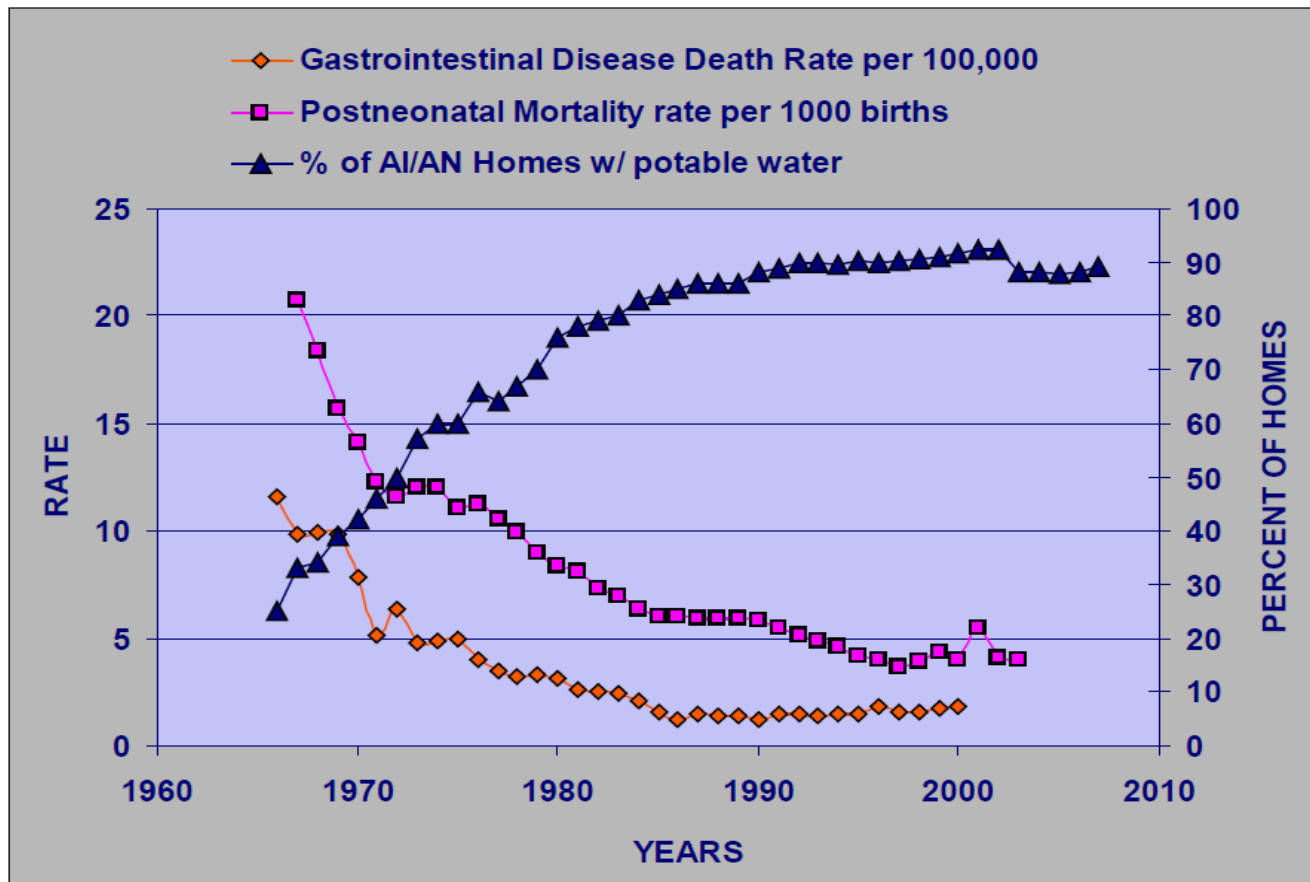


Shared Border: **Water Policy**





Safe Drinking Water & Adequate Sanitation



Source: Safe Water & Waste Disposal Facilities Fact Sheet, Indian Health Service, January 2013

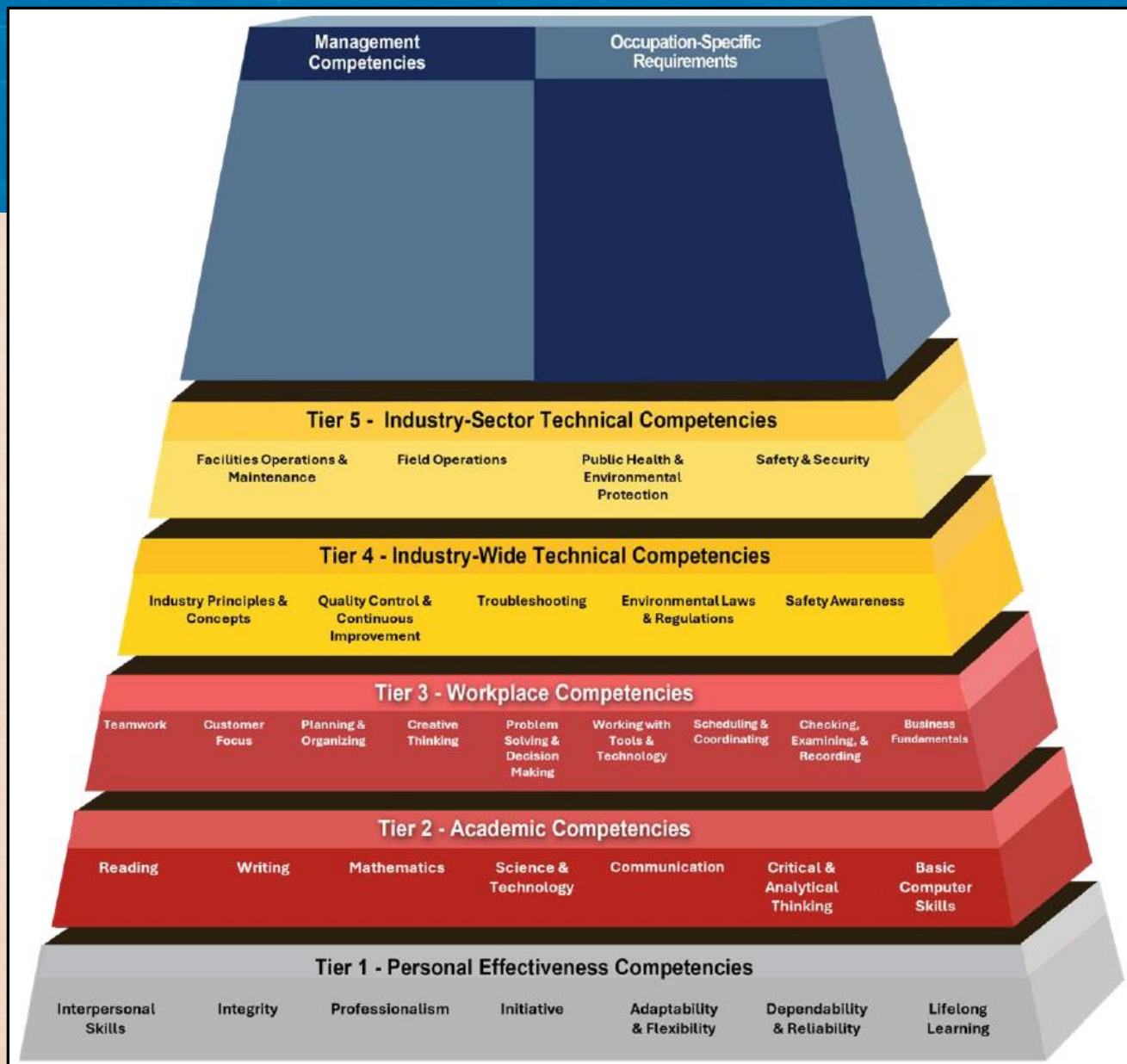


Tribal Water & Wastewater Utilities





Water and Wastewater Competency Model





Water Operators are Public Health Professionals

Water/wastewater system operator is a **public health professional** and operator certification demonstrates the operator has the skills, knowledge, education and experience necessary to deliver safe water / adequate sanitation.

—from U.S. EPA (75 Federal Register 48329, Aug. 2010)

- Certification = a professional credential designed specifically to protect public health





Operator Certification / Credentials

**Training
Completion
Certificate**

**Training
Certificate
Program**

**Professional
Certification**

**Professional
License**

Supporting Tribal operators is an additional way by which Tribal governments can exercise their sovereignty and promote their self-determination goals.





ITCA Tribal Operator Certification

Professional Certification

ITCA is a U.S. EPA-approved Provider of Operator Certification services for personnel working on Tribal lands



- Annually provides 19 different types of operator training courses



- Provides standardized certification examinations



- Administers professional certification credentialing services

Professional Certifications

Water Treatment-Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 (U.S. EPA approved)

Water Distribution-Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 (U.S. EPA approved)

Very Small Water Systems – VSWS (U.S. EPA approved)

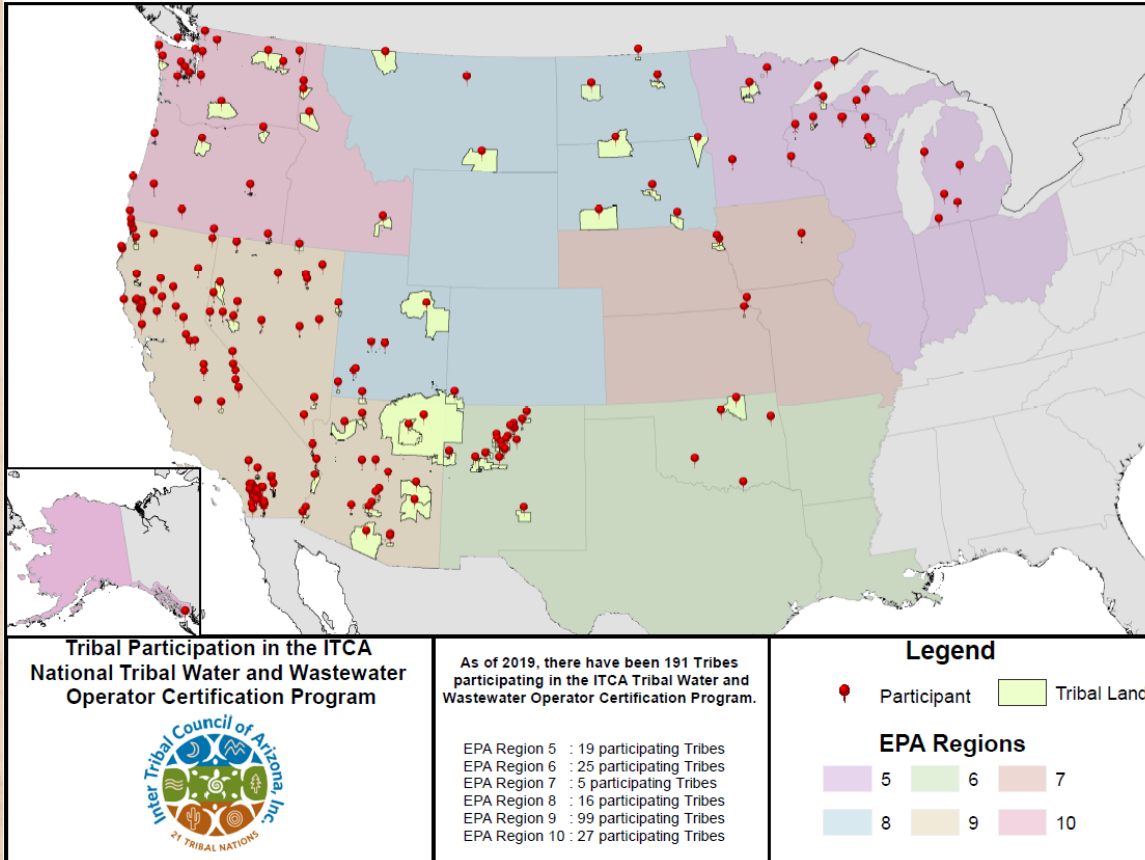
Wastewater Collection-Levels, 1, 2, 3, and 4

Wastewater Treatment-Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4

Utility Management Certification-Level 1



The ITCA National Tribal Water & Wastewater Operator Certification Program



Reciprocity:
Equivalency of operator certification between two certifying authorities

Purpose: multi-jurisdiction and Career mobility

Jurisdiction No. 1

Exam waiver

Jurisdiction No. 2



Workforce Challenges

- Roughly 1/3 of the water sector workforce is eligible to retire in the next 10 years (quoted from USEPA website)

Tribal water projects need more than a one-time fix, senators told

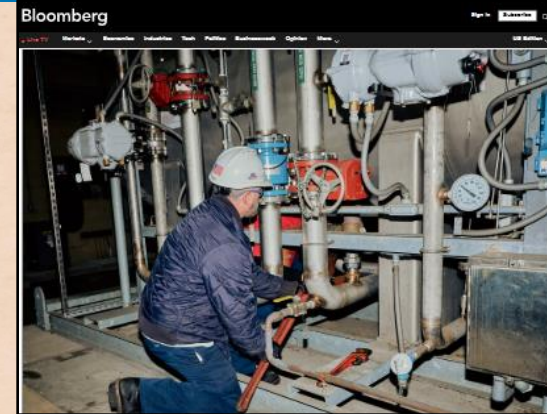
From the Collection: Read more on water issues affecting Arizona series

Lux Butler Cronkite News Sep 21, 2023 Updated Oct 26, 2024



Funding for tribal water infrastructure is good, but that it needs to be supplemented by funding for operation and maintenance if the systems are to last. Brian Bennon, a water expert with the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, told a Senate hearing this week.
Lux Butler, Cronkite News

“Infrastructure construction alone cannot solve this access crisis,” Bennon testified. “Infrastructure construction must be balanced with the building of managerial financial and technical capacity of the utilities to properly operate and maintain the water infrastructure investments.”



America's Next Water Crisis? A Lack of Experienced Workers

Climate change and aging infrastructure already threaten to disrupt drinking water supplies. A shrinking workforce risks making the problem worse.

By Kendra Pierre-Louis

December 20, 2024 at 4:17 AM MST

[Save](#) [Translate](#) [Listen 6:04](#)

Shannan Walton was at a conference in Utah for water workers – the often-invisible employees who ensure Americans have clean tap water and working sewer systems – when she found herself seated next to a 90-year-old gentleman.

“I thought, ‘Oh how nice, they’re inviting a retiree to still participate and be involved,’” said Walton, who runs workforce development for the National Rural Water Association, a nonprofit that trains and supports industry professionals in small communities across the US. But as the conversation progressed, she learned he was still working.

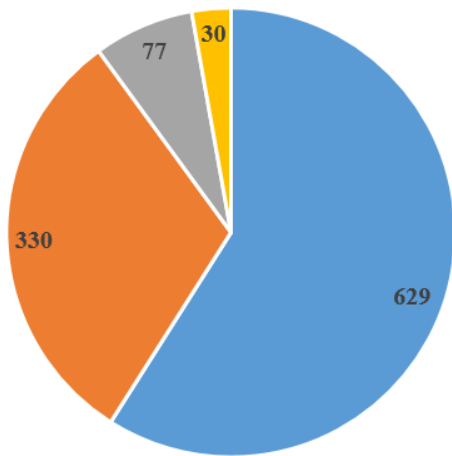
“He was 90 years old and still performing the duties because of the challenge of finding someone else to step up,” said Walton.



Workforce Challenges

- The small, rural nature of many Tribal systems can lead to insufficient funding for operations and maintenance (O&M).
- Small, rural water utilities face challenges in recruiting, training, and retaining employees, as well as regulatory compliance challenges (as shown in the next slide).

**Size of Active Public Water Systems
in Indian Country**



■ Very Small ■ Small ■ Medium ■ Large

SDWIS Database

data query on November 26, 2024

Active Public Water Systems in Indian Country

	Very Small population 0-500	Small population 501-3,300	Medium population 3,301-10,000	Large population 10,001-100,000	Very Large population 100,000+	Totals
EPA Region 10	99	42	5	1	0	147
EPA Region 9	292	156	32	18	0	498
EPA Region 8	105	46	10	1	0	162
EPA Region 7	6	6	1	0	0	13
EPA Region 6	35	38	14	4	0	91
EPA Region 5	64	36	9	2	0	111
EPA Region 4	19	5	4	2	0	30
EPA Region 3	0	0	0	0	0	0
EPA Region 2	6	1	2	0	0	9
EPA Region 1	3	0	0	2	0	5
totals	629	330	77	30	0	1,066
percent	59.0	31.0	7.2	2.8	0	
total	959					
percent	90.0					



Regulatory Compliance Challenges

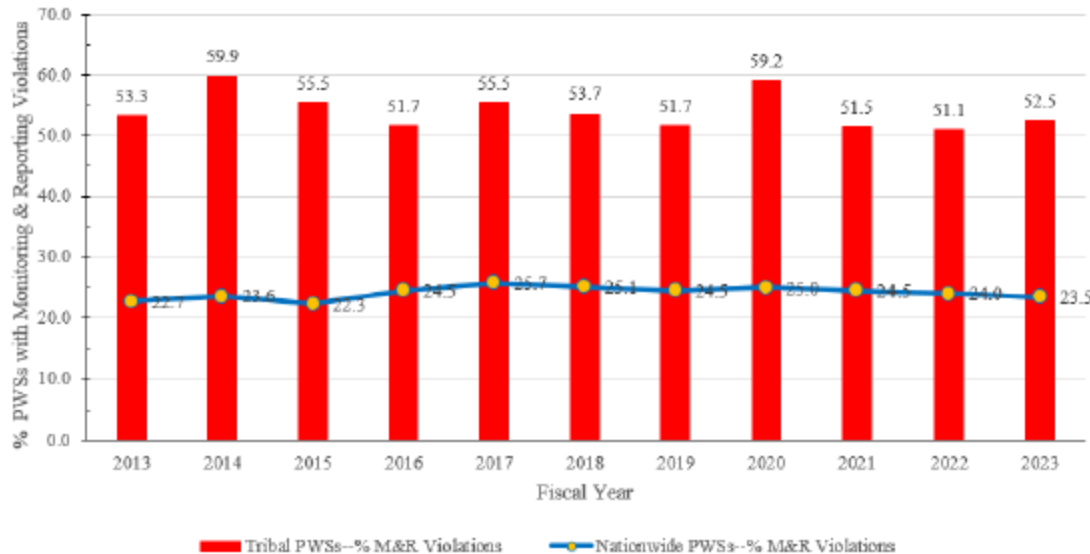
EXHIBIT 1 – Disparity Trends in Violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act, 2013-2023

Source: USEPA Enforcement and Compliance History Online trends dashboard for Drinking Water, accessed December 2024

Drinking Water Compliance Disparities:
Any Violations
Tribal Systems versus Systems Nationwide

Drinking Water Compliance Disparities:
Health-Based Violations
Tribal Systems versus Systems Nationwide

Drinking Water Compliance Disparities:
Monitoring & Reporting Violations
Tribal Systems versus Systems Nationwide





Changes to Exams & Jurisprudence

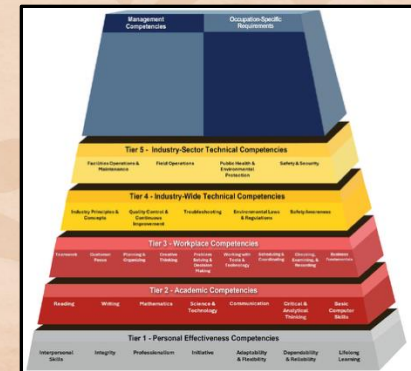
The national standardized water operator certification exams changed in 2017 to align with credentialing industry best practices.

They now focus on industry-wide, universal competencies and removed test questions on the highly-variable regulations.

Federal Baseline
Regulations &
Requirements

State Primacy
Regulations &
Requirements

In response, ITCA created SDWA Federal Baseline Regulations Exam Modules to bridge the gap in Tribal Operator Certification.





Changes to Exams & Jurisprudence

The “FedReg” Exam Modules for Water Treatment and Water Distribution each consist of 40 questions and are OPEN BOOK using tablets.

The purpose of the FedReg Exam Modules is to measure water operator knowledge, skills, and abilities in finding and applying federal regulations to solve problems.

FedRegs Exam Module passing rate: 56%

FedReg Reference Tablets are being used in the field and on the job.





Shared Border: Water Policy

Tribal Leaders Water Policy Council

- Provides a Tribal Leadership forum that facilitates collaboration of tribes with other water resource management agencies
- Coordinates a Tribal presence within groups working on federal, state, and regional water policies
- Strengthens Tribal capacity through improved access to information and analysis on water resource management issues





ITCA National Tribal Water Systems Programs

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