

Irrepressible: An Interview with Bob Fischer

Bob Fischer, water quality superintendent for the City of South Burlington, is the first to admit he's had a varied career. He seems to chalk it up to having a rambunctious (though his wife and kids might describe it otherwise) personality. For example, he was expelled from high school in Buffalo for drag racing outside the school: "I had a 1970 Charger R/T with a 440 with a 6-71 supercharger and two Holley 600s," he remembers fondly. "Turns out drag racing in front of the school while everyone is boarding buses is a 'no no' . . ."

Still, he apparently has a responsible streak that has allowed him to garner a BA in Biology and History from the State University of New York, Buffalo; then work as a federal fisheries biologist (in California); and then to become an operator at the Tahoe-Truckee Sanitation Agency Facility (TTSA). Next, moving on to Vermont, he worked as operator in Stratton and Middlebury, then as assistant chief and later chief operator at Montpelier's WWTF. He spent 14 years there and as chief operator at Websterville WTF before moving on to his current job in 2015. Along the way, he earned certifications as a Grade 5DM WW operator and a Class 4C water operator.



Bob explains the beauty of biosolids to Karen Horn of VLCT.

treasurer, and long-time chair of the Government Affairs Committee (GAC). The GAC is in charge of monitoring policies and regulations, assessing their implications, and authoring advisories based on a new rule's practical feasibility or impact at the facility level. Bob takes to the policy arena like a fish to water – maybe something he learned in his fisheries biology days.

Q: What prompts your interest in public policy? How did you learn so much about how the sausage factory works?

BF: Like everyone else, I knew little about the industry until I ended up in it. Having moved seven times in seven years as a fisheries biologist (your next upward move is not where you are now) I took a job at TTSA. I saw how skilled and dedicated the operators were, the incredible work they were doing. People – the public and policy-makers – need to know we are the environmentalists and leading protectors of public health in Vermont. If a town loses power, essential services, like hospitals, can go on generators; if they lose their computer system, they can operate manually. But if they lose water and wastewater, pretty soon really bad things happen. Being somewhat loud and obnoxious, I started telling others about it whether they wanted to hear it or not.

For the record, Bob has verified that he doesn't have an identical twin, even though he seems to be everywhere at all times. Space limitations prevent a full listing of his affiliations, but everybody in state government, Vermont's federal Congressional delegations – and in regional water quality organizations such as NEWEA, NEWWA, the Operator Certification Board, the Citizen's Advisory Committee for Lake Champlain – seems to know Bob.

In May, after 15 years on GMWEA's board of directors, he stepped aside to make room for new board members and to focus on his work at New England Water Environment Association (he's now vice-president) and other commitments. At GMWEA, he has served as president, vice-president, and

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Bob Fischer Interview, continued

Q: Over 23 years, you moved from managing Websterville’s (pop. 550) wastewater to managing Montpelier’s (pop. 8,000) to South Burlington’s (pop. 20,000). What are some differences between the smaller towns/plants and big ones?

BF: Not as much as you might think. All operators (water, wastewater and stormwater) try to do the very best they can. Operators care about their systems and the people they serve, and they’re always in need of more financing to repair and improve their systems. These systems are incredibly expensive and operators are always in charge of many millions of dollars of equipment. I have toured very large facilities such as Sacramento, California, where an operator there might spend their entire career on one piece of equipment. I enjoy the diversity of Vermont-sized facilities -- you have to be able to do everything. So, it is always about reacting to some new problem or old outstanding problems and working to keep everything going with often limited resources and staffing.



Sen. Patrick Leahy presents Bob (left), and GMWEA Pres. Rick Kenney with the Lake Champlain Heritage Award in 2016.

Q: Boots on the ground perspective: Do you feel wastewater workers get the respect they deserve? Do they get enough pay and professional development opportunity?

BF: No to all three, though it does continue to improve. Visibility is what is needed. We are “out of sight out of mind.” It is up to all of us to “spread the word” and always be professional with the public as they generally have very little contact with our work or workplaces.

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Ed.: You manage a large plant, you are active in many water-quality nonprofits; you’re a ski coach, and you have a wife and four kids. How do you manage to juggle all these commitments? What advice can you give others?

BF: Just don’t sleep and it is all good. I’ll sleep when I’m dead. I do have advice I often give new ski coaches such as “That which doesn’t kill you . . .” and, thinking of Nietzsche, they always respond “. . . makes you stronger.” To which I reply, “Actually no . . . it generally gives you arthritis in the affected area when you are 50.”

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Bob Fischer Interview, continued

Q: You've often commented on the importance of a sense of humor for wastewater workers. Any humorous anecdotes you'd like to share?

BF: In Montpelier, we were awarded the Governor's Award for Energy Efficiency in 2015. While brainstorming ways to save energy, the assistant chief operator said, "We spend a lot of money heating the generator building, which is not insulated -- we should look into getting a block heater." When the service tech showed up for regular maintenance I asked him, "Could you give us a quote on installing a block heater?" He responded, "Sure, or if you want you could just flip this switch as it came with one from the factory." Hey, there were a lot of switches and it wasn't labelled. We did save over a \$1,000 a month in the winter after that.

Q: What are your thoughts about the future of the water quality sector? Is America starting to get the message about water quality, water quality professionals, and infrastructure needs?

BF: I have seen knowledge and respect for the industry and operators steadily increasing. There are many challenges, but we are probably not going back to living in caves so people are starting to get it -- slowly. I had a conversation with a legislator who said that the solution is composting toilets. I suggested that nothing is that simple. The vast majority of what comes out of houses is water from showers, laundry, sinks, etc. Also, any compost you get from a composting toilet can only be disposed of at a wastewater facility! If you are opposed to class A biosolids land application, where the biosolids are rigorously tested and regulated before application, are you going to take the compost out of your toilet -- which certainly hasn't met time and temperature requirements -- and put it on your garden?

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Q: So, what's next for Bob Fischer?

Bob says he's got plenty to do at NEWEA for the next few years; he may also want to come back to GMWEA's board at some point. He'll certainly keep skiing: "Skiing is what I do," he says. "Everything else is to pay for this addiction . . . For 21 years, I have been the oldest and fattest coach for the top United States freestyle team, at Killington Mountain School." How about work? Bob chuckles. "I owe so much money on my four kids' college educations that for succession planning at South Burlington, I have had to move my retirement date to 2083."

Editor: Thank you, Bob! Your enthusiasm is an inspiration to us all -- best of luck in all your endeavors.

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