

MISSION-CRITICAL PROFILE

Name: Laurie Brenner

Organization: Union Sanitary District



Job Category (Check one below):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water Treatment | <input type="checkbox"/> Electronic Maintenance Technician/ Instrument Technician |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrician/Electrical Line Worker |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wastewater Treatment | <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist/Mechanic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wastewater Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

1. Please describe the work you do:

Monitoring, adjusting and repairing all chemical, physical (mechanical) and biological processes used to treat wastewater at the Alvarado Treatment Plant in Union City, CA. Collecting samples and data and making sensory observations about how things are running and functioning. Reporting factually when things are out of the ordinary and resolving problems that arise at the plant in a collaborative manner with Maintenance, Lab, Engineering and all other departments as needed.

Basically, we ensure that our treatment plant always meets the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) and Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) permit stipulations, thereby ensuring that our effluent “product” is safe and well treated for the public and the environment.

2. What combination of education, vocational training, apprenticeship, experience, and/or skill did you obtain in order to be qualified and selected for your job?

I participated in a Regional Occupational Program (ROP) which utilized the California State University at Sacramento Office of Water Programs texts (Operation of Wastewater Treatment Plants Vol. I & II) and “volunteered” as an intern at a local Water Pollution Control Plant for over 500 hours to obtain a certificate of completion for the program.

I had prior education and quality certifications that also contributed to my eligibility (Master’s degree- MBA; American Society for Quality CQA and CHA designations, etc.). I am also a licensed water treatment and distribution operator in the State of California (CDPH) California Department of Public Health licenses.

There was an open recruitment for the District with key experiential requirements that I applied for. A written test followed; then a QAI (qualification appraisal interview) and several interviews for “finalists.” I was offered the job and started work on July 9, 2012.

3. What do you like best about your job?

As an avid outdoor and wildlife enthusiast (hiker, kayaker, bike rider), I am proud that the work I do every day contributes to a cleaner San Francisco Bay. The fact that I protect health and human safety along with the environment is also important to me.

I am able to work both inside and outside and learn complex processes. I love the challenge of managing and monitoring “living” processes and that (although there are standard rounds in the plant) every day presents new challenges and opportunities for learning.

4. Please tell us about the projects and activities you have enjoyed most in your work in the water/wastewater field, and what made them rewarding,

Helping guide school groups on plant tours (when I was with another agency) was fun and rewarding. I loved watching the next potential operators get engaged and ask about our processes.

There is something almost “Zen” about hosing weirs on a sunny day and watching the birds fly in and around the plant. I know that I am helping to keep the Bay clean and it makes me happy.

5. What qualities and capabilities are needed in order for a person in your area of expertise to be successful in the water/wastewater industry?

I believe that success in any field comes from a passion for doing the work at hand, being detail and quality oriented, being a true team player (we rely heavily on peer operators every day) and having a desire to “do the right thing.”

In terms of wastewater specific attributes, a person should be fairly good at math and be capable of understanding complex systems and how changes made at one station may impact others. Having strong communication skills puts one at a distinct advantage in this field as well.

6. Do you have any advice for an individual who is considering pursuing a career in your field in the water/wastewater industry?

Get into an educational program like an Occupational or certificate or degree program and stick with it! Continue your studies by finding a plant to perform volunteer work at as an OIT (Operator in Training). Set up tours at plants you believe you might like to work in and ask the Operators you encounter there for their suggestions.

Establish a professional network by joining and attending California Water Environment Association (CWEA) and/or Water Environment Federation (WEF) events and seminars. Sign up for Brown & Caldwell newsletters and frequently check their website for job opportunities (there are several good water/wastewater job listings available).

From this point, apply for every position that you meet the basic published qualifications for. Pay attention to what agencies are looking for and fill any gaps between requirements and your skill set with additional training/research, Hang in there and never give up, even if you fail an exam. Make every step in your progression a learning event- if you get a letter stating that you failed an exam or were not selected for a position, write the panel members and ask for their constrictive criticism and feedback on areas of perceived weakness and how you might improve for a future opportunity.