

History: USGS WRD Retirees' Organization

By Richard A. Enbgerg, WRD Retirees Archivist

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Brief History of Water Activities in USGS

The U. S. Geological Survey Water Resources Division Retirees Organization (WRD Retirees) was formed in 1973 by a group of retired hydrologists. However, the study and evaluation of the nation's water resources by the U. S. Geological Survey (USGS) began only a few years after the USGS was created March 3, 1879 by President Rutherford B. Hayes. The early history of water resources investigations by USGS is critical to the history of WRD Retirees.

By 1884, the USGS was training individuals as hydrographers and in 1888 the National Streamgaging Program was initiated with the installation of the first gaging station, the Embudo, New Mexico gage on the Rio Grande River. However, it wasn't until 1894 that there was a Congressional appropriation for streamgaging and that same year the Hydrographic Division of USGS was created.

In 1902, water became an even more important function of USGS with the creation of the Hydrographic Branch which included not only the Hydrographic Division for streamgaging but also the Division of Hydrology for groundwater and the Division of Hydro-Economics for water quality as it related to agriculture and industry. This continued with some reorganization and name changes until 1949.

In 1949, the Water Resources Division (WRD), as we know it, was created with separate branches for surface water, groundwater, and water quality. This organization was not a whole lot different than the organization as it was set up in 1902 but it did create the name WRD. Although the name didn't change, WRD was reorganized again in 1964 to allow the three branches to be combined at the District level under District Chiefs who reported to the Division.

This brief history of water activities in USGS provides the backdrop for the creation and formation of WRD Retirees. Many of the individuals who began their careers about the time that WRD was formed in 1949 were retired or were nearing retirement age in the early 1970s. WRD was like a second family to many of these individuals and they didn't want to lose track of former colleagues after retirement.

Establishment of Organization for Retirees

So in the spring of 1973 in the same general time period that Washington, DC offices of USGS were consolidated at the new Headquarters in Reston, after serious discussions between them and other colleagues, a group of WRD retirees, George Ferguson, Joe Wells, and Ken Love secured a meeting with Chief Hydrologist Roy Hendricks to present their ideas about an organization for WRD Retirees and to determine if WRD would support such

an organization. Hendricks supported the idea and named Joe Cragwall to be the WRD liaison to the fledgling organization. Thus, WRD Retirees was born.

The initial activity was a nationwide canvas of about 200 retirees from WRD whose addresses were known. This canvas was conducted by a group of eight retirees from the DC area. They explained the concept of WRD Retirees and requested that interested persons send one dollar to defray costs. The reaction was overwhelming and individual contributions of up to \$75 were received. Based on the enthusiastic response, a 12 member "Interim Work Group" chaired by George Ferguson was formed and this group guided the activities of WRD Retirees from 1973 through 1975. Charlie Morgan served as Secretary of the group.

Other activities in the 1973--1975 time-period included publication in the fall of 1973 of the first Newsletter which was two pages in length. A directory of 221 members was also printed in 1973 followed in late 1974 by the second directory of nearly 300 members. During the same period, a constitution and by-laws were developed for the group by Walt Durum and were approved by the membership. At Joe Cragwall's suggestion, interested active WRD personnel were invited to become affiliate members of WRD Retirees.

In 1976, WRD Retirees elected its first slate of National Officers and Regional Directors. Presidents are elected by the membership and serve two-year terms. Interestingly, by this time, Roy Hendricks had retired and had become an active member of WRD Retirees. He was elected the first president. Other National officers include Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Archivist. Like the President, the Vice President is elected for a two-year term. Although the Secretary, Treasurer and Archivist are elected to their positions, they tend to serve for extended periods of time. WRD Retirees Presidents from 1976 to the present are listed in Appendix A.

Current Activities

Presently, WRD Retirees has a "State Contact" person in nearly every state. These people encourage other retirees in their state to contribute to the "News of Retirees" section of the newsletter and to contact recent retirees. They also are the people that usually are responsible for local meetings. Local meetings or gatherings are held in approximately 40 locations around the country. The State contact persons and the locations of local meetings are listed elsewhere on the WRD Retirees website.

Thanks to the original interest in the organization by Roy Hendricks and Joe Cragwall, two rooms on the 5th floor of the National Center were made available to WRD Retirees. One office is used by the National Secretary to maintain correspondence with members and to collect pertinent information about members including new member information and information about the deaths of existing members. The membership of WRD Retirees peaked at about 1400 members around 2010 but has been declining slightly since then.

Membership

The 2015 Directory lists 1315 members and affiliates. The second office is a storehouse of historical information about USGS including an extensive library of photographs from

earlier days. It is maintained by the National archivist. When WRD still existed, it provided valuable critical services to WRD Retirees including mailing newsletters and directories and providing WRD Retirees with information concerning recently retired employees. More recently, privacy concerns for individuals have hampered these efforts significantly.

Current dues for WRD Retirees are \$10 per year. What do members get for their \$10? Presently, WRD Retirees receive a newsletter on a quarterly basis and a directory of members on an annual basis. Members also receive access to the WRD Retirees website and Facebook page. Another principal activity open to all members is the WRD Retirees Reunion held every two years. Finally, in 2006, WRD Retirees initiated a program to offer scholarships for Hydrologic Technicians. These scholarships are principally available to students from colleges that offer two-year degrees as Hydrologic Technicians. The newsletter and the reunions will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Newsletter

From its humble two-page beginning in 1973, the WRD Retirees Newsletter more recently under the leadership of Jim Biesecker, Dotty West, and Merilee Bennett has grown to its present minimum of 24 pages. For some recent issues, the newsletter has contained a supplement of up to 8 pages that contains articles and reminiscences by members. The newsletter itself contains a message from the current President, news about retirements, a necrology, and photographs from meetings of local or state retirees' groups. Before and after the biennial reunions it contains information about the reunion and a discussion about and photographs from the reunion. Probably the most important and most popular feature is the "News of Retirees" section when current members share information about their activities and lives.

Reunions

The first of the biennial reunions was held in 1982 at the National Center in Reston, VA. It wasn't called a reunion that year but instead was called a Founding Day event. It was so well received that it was proposed that reunions be held on even years in the future. This has been the case ever since. At the time, WRD had four regions and it was proposed and accepted that the reunions rotate between the four regions. This has been the case ever since. In consultation with members from the region whose turn it will be to host the next reunion, the current President selects a location and a chairperson. The chairperson assembles a committee of local retirees to put together the reunion. The reunions are usually held at a hotel in the city in which the reunion is located.

In recent years, the average reunion attendance of members and spouses has approached or exceeded 150 attendees. Typically, the reunions have begun on a Thursday night with an opening reception. On Friday morning, a business meeting is held, presided over by the current President. Following remarks by the President, and the reading of a necrology, there often is a presentation by a representative from Headquarters about what is going on in water in the USGS and often a technical presentation by someone from the region where the meeting is being held. Then the fun begins. Friday afternoon and all-day Saturday are reserved for field trips both to water-related sites in or around the reunion city or to local attractions, for example, a brewery tour. A golf outing is usually organized for those members who would like to play. The field trips are the highlights of the reunions. There

are usually 7 or 8 trips to choose from. The reunions conclude on Saturday night with the gala banquet. At the banquet, the committee members are recognized as are those persons attending a reunion for the first time. In the case of some of the more recent reunions, follow-up activities such as a cruise or a train trip have been organized. The reunions are great fun and the amount of reminiscing is truly amazing. Locations of the past reunions are given in Appendix B.

USGS Reorganizations on Retirees Organization

WRD Retirees (now called USGS Retirees) in 2018 is in its 45th year of existence. As stated earlier, the membership of the organization peaked around 2010 and has declined somewhat since. We are losing members at a slightly higher rate than we are gaining new members. There probably are several reasons for this but probably a principal reason is that the WRD that we all spent our time working for no longer exists. A USGS reorganization several years ago eliminated the Divisions that were in existence for more than 50 years. Water remains one of the six science mission areas of USGS, but the lines are not as distinctly drawn between the areas as they were when water was a 'Division'. This together with other decisions made within USGS during the last 20 years may have changed the dynamic that existed during the heyday of WRD when most of those of us working then looked upon WRD as sort of our extended or second family. The present slate of officers is working diligently to look for ways to reverse the membership decline.

George Ferguson Award

The names of Retirees who have been recognized for their service are listed in Appendix C.

Background

The WRD Retirees Association was established with a full charter in 1973. The mission for retirees of the WRD is to maintain contact with each other during their retirement years. As of this date (3-28-18), there are approximately 1300 members. There were two major mechanisms in the charter to accomplish the mission, which remain today, 1) Publish a quarterly newsletter, to be sent to each member, in which any and all members can learn not only about activities of former friends and co-workers but are also urged to update their ongoing retirement activities for subsequent issues, and 2) Hold a reunion of the retirees every 2 years in a city on a rotating basis in one of the 4 regions of the country that were in existence at the time of the conception of the organization (Northeastern, Southeastern, Central and Western). To this day, that has been accomplished without fail.

To make the organization functional, a staff of retirees was put into place on a 2-year rotating elected-basis, just as if it were a small business. For example, there is a leadership team, a small team to accomplish the newsletter aspect of the mission, another rotating team to accomplish the 2-year reunion part of the mission, and available staff to accomplish various other tasks, chores, and issues that need to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis throughout any given year. The fact that the mission of the organization has been accomplished for almost a half century has been next to amazing as every person involved has been a volunteer. There have literally been hundreds or more volunteers who have served in some capacity over the years, some of whom have served the organization for numerous years to others who have served for longer periods of time that have literally

mimicked a second career. There has been no taxpayer funding for the organization; all funding has come from nominal personal membership dues of which no money goes toward any salaries or other perks.

Award Established

In the 1990's the WRD Retirees Service Award was created to honor individuals for their service to the organization. To at least provide some kind of recognition system, the association established the "WRD Lifetime Award" for recognition of many years of distinguished and loyal service to WRD Retirees. For unknown reasons, the award has been seldom used and has no hard and fast criteria for selecting candidates. Since the award has no monetary value, nor should it ever have any, and all potential candidates for the award would be volunteers, it seems that hard and fast criteria may not be necessary as a requirement.

Award Renamed for George Ferguson

The 2018-19 officers, at the suggestion of Herb Freiburger, who was president when it was last awarded, decided to resurrect the award. Officers and Regional Directors nominated individuals and voted on them based on criteria established in 2018. Three individuals were selected with the awards to be presented at 2018 Retirees Reunion.

The officers group also decided to rename the award after the founder of WRD Retirees, George Ferguson. A brief biography follows.

George Ferguson was born in April 1906. He enjoyed a 44-year career with USGS, working in Ohio, Hawaii, Texas, Florida, and the DC area. He was Northeast Regional Hydrologist when he retired in 1972. In 1973, he chaired a work group of 8 retirees who went to Chief Hydrologist, Roy Hendricks, with a proposal to create the WRD Retirees organization. Hendricks agreed to the proposal. From 1973 through 1975 the work group ran the new organization, with George Ferguson serving as the ad-hoc first president. George also began the first newsletter in November 1973. It was two pages on one sheet of paper.

The first elected President, Roy Hendricks, was elected in late 1975 to serve a two-year term beginning in 1976. But George wasn't through - he served as newsletter editor until 1987.

After that, he regularly attended the meetings of the Reston chapter of WRD Retirees. During the April 2008 meeting the Reston chapter held a party to celebrate his 102nd birthday. He was alert and enjoyed the company of many friends. He died in his sleep a month later. He was a true gentleman and richly deserves the Service Award to be named after him.

Award Guidelines

However, the following guidelines should be considered:

1. The candidate may have provided many years of service by just doing their job for the Retiree organization but, in doing so, may have been very instrumental in attaining the mission of the organization.

2. The candidate may have “stepped up” to temporarily fill a gap in some position for an unusually long period of time that otherwise would have resulted in a failure of the mission.
3. The candidate consistently performs their job or task in a manner that exceeds what might have been expected.
4. The candidate is a retiree in the field who has never been elected and who is not expected to be doing work of the organization. However, they are actually doing it by being instrumental in keeping the organization alive at the field level.
5. The candidate has or is heading up a 2-year reunion committee and pulling off a successful reunion, which is a stressful job.
6. The candidate should be an active participant in keeping the organization successful and hopefully has attended a significant number of reunions.

Appendices

Appendix A. Presidents of the WRD Retirees Organization

Years	Name	Years	Name
1976-1977	E. L. "Roy" Hendricks	2002-2003	Thomas H. Yorke
1976-1979	Warren S. Daniels	2004-2005	James F. Blakey
1980-1981	Walton H. Durum	2006-2007	James E. Biesecker
1982-1983	O. Milton Hackett	2008-2009	Richard A. Engberg
1984-1985	Joseph S. Cragwall, Jr.	2010-2011	Herbert J. Frieberger
1986-1987	Gerald Meyer	2012-2013	Clarence W. Anderson
1988-1989	Robert M. Beall	2014-2015	Ethan T. Smith
1990-1991	Russell H. Langford	2016-2017	James Kircher
1992-1993	Porter E. Ward	2018-2019	James Stark
1994-1995	Thomas J. Buchanan	2020-2021	Pete Anttila
1996-1997	Donald M. Thomas		
1998-1999	William B. Mann, IV		
2000-2001	Robert Schoen		

Appendix B. Locations of WRD Retirees' Organization Reunions

Year	Location	Year	Location
1982	Reston, VA	2004	Portland, OR
1984	Denver, CO	2006	Madison, WI
1986	Baton Rouge, LA	2008	Clearwater, FL
1988	Seattle, WA	2010	Denver, CO
1990	Orlando, FL	2012	Boise, ID
1992	Williamsburg, VA	2014	Portland, ME
1994	Albuquerque, NM	2016	Nashville, TN
1996	Pacific Grove, CA	2018	Twin Cities, MN
1998	Lancaster, PA		
2000	Atlanta, GA		
2002	San Antonio, TX		

Appendix C. Recipients of the George Ferguson Award

Year	Awardees	Year	Awardees
1990's	George Ferguson Sumner Heidel Bob Beall	2010	Jim Biesecker Jim Blakey John Musser
2002	Bill Schneider Porter Ward C.T. Welborn	2018	Andy Anderson Merilee Bennett Tom York
2006	Bill Boning Jack Pickering Loren Young		