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A \$7 million upgrade of the Sherman wastewater treatment plant is complete.

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The Village of Sherman's \$7 million wastewater treatment plant improvement project is complete after nearly four years of work, and members of the community are proud of both the facility and its Chief Operator, Jay Irwin.

Irwin joined the treatment plant's team in 2007 as an assistant operator and became Chief Operator in 2012, at age 26. Since then, he has received several recognitions for his excellence in maintaining the plant.

Most recently, Irwin was interviewed by Ted J. Rulseh, Editor of the national magazine, Treatment Plant Operator. The article, which will appear in the June issue, focuses not only on the improvements to the Sherman facility, but also on Irwin's expertise and dedication.

In 2021, along with the former plant operator Paul Fisher, Irwin won a Westec Water Ingenuity Award called the SOLIDS SLICER AWARD for developing a process for reducing the drying time of biosolids.



Irwin and Fisher invented a rake, which "skis" over the solids in the facility's drying beds, increasing surface area and shortening drying time. Irwin updated the original model, making it dual-directional and safer for the operator.

The October 18, 2019, issue of Empowering Pumps & Equipment featured Irwin as Industry Person of the Week. They interviewed him and gave a brief history of his experience as a wastewater treatment plant operator and Sherman's Direct Inline Pump System project.

Mayor Colleen Meeder described the importance of the DIP system to the village. Direct Inline Pump — the first of its kind to be installed in NY State and only the third in all of the United States, has brought efficiency and safety to the entrance of the plant from the gravity fed collection system, she said.

Irwin says he is pleased to receive recognition for his work in the treatment plant operator field. "I am most proud of the 2018 Wastewater Operator Specialist of the Year Award," he said. This award, from the New York Rural Water Association, was celebrated by the municipality.

Meeder noted the municipal employees share admiration for Irwin's accomplishments. "The Village of Sherman is proud of the awards reflecting his dedication to our community, environment, and the role he plays in educating and promoting the needs and services of the wastewater industry," she said. "Jay's management style is a balance between being open to new innovation, building efficiency, and knowing when the 'old ways' are still the 'best ways'," she added.

Irwin understands the need for a larger vision, providing more services, and through shared services, bringing savings and revenue to a system run on

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fixed expenses, Meeder said. "Whether it is the shared use of equipment in the case of the new mobile dewatering system, or personally assisting other plants with administration, while they are undergoing staff transitions, Jay sees an opportunity for municipalities to support each other," she said.

Irwin said he has always enjoyed working for the village. "I love it," he said. "It's great, taking everything, we're getting sent, and making it safe for the environment."

Irwin said the job was challenging at first. "I had to learn everything to do with activated sludge," he said. "Once I got into a routine, it got pretty manageable."

In fact, Irwin said, the most difficult aspect of the job was finding time for all the tasks that needed to be done. However, the upgrades to the wastewater treatment plant has eased this problem. "With the upgrades, it has made things a lot easier to maintain," he said.

Sherman, like most small municipalities, has had difficulty retaining certified assistant operators for the plant, Irwin said. "Since I have been the chief operator, I've had one certified operator stay for three years," he said. "Other than that, we have not had an assistant operator for more than a few months at a time. They get their certification, and they move on."

Meeder said inflation has exacerbated the problem of employee retention. "All the same inflationary conditions we each personally feel in our homes and businesses are also putting financial pressures on municipalities," she said. "This is driving wages and making it difficult to compete with recruiting and retaining the number of certified positions we must have to meet DEC and DOH requirements."

Irwin has no plans to leave the Village of Sherman, and Meeder says the village is fortunate to have a skilled WWTP operator who plans on staying. "We are very fortunate to have a licensed operator of our own who is committed to our community. The skilled workforce in general, but particularly water and sewer operators, are exceptionally hard to find," she said.

Irwin enjoys living, working, and serving his home community, Meeder said. "I grew up here, I was born in Westfield and moved here in the seventh grade," he said. "I've been a member of the fire department since 1996 and I plan on sticking it out here until I retire."

Meeder believes that the nature of Irwin's job at the WWTP contributes to his availability as a volunteer firefighter. "As a volunteer for Stanley Hose Company he is able to respond during the day and has the flexibility to return to work and carry on," she said.

Irwin said both the people and the diversity of the job contribute to his decision to stay. "I like the small-town end of it. I know everybody here, which makes it better," he said. "I never wanted to go and start somewhere new. Some people think it's the same work every day, but every day is different."

Irwin remarked on how Sherman has undergone many changes, including the upgrades to the plant. He gives credit to Meeder for making it all happen. "It has been quite the process," he said, referring to the wastewater treatment plant improvement project. "Ninety percent of it happened because of Colleen and all the work she has done behind the scenes. Operating a plant like this is great, but it's only because of her."

In fact, Irwin said, the future for Sherman is very bright because of the many improvement projects, including the Main Street and stormwater projects, that are underway. "We have nothing but good things going on here," he said.