

The Backflow Certification Confusion – What’s Up? And Why Is It So Confusing In California?

By Dan Demoss, Executive Director, CRWA

In the last 10 months CRWA started training and Certifying Backflow Testers and Specialists. I started working on doing this several years ago. I had frequent starts and stops in this process due to conflicting information and frankly misinformation and confusion within the state of California about training, testing and certifying Backflow testers.

I naively thought that this training would be like most of the training CRWA has put together in that you get your course agenda approved for contact hours and move forward from there. I worked with other training agencies and other State agencies, EPA region 9, DWR, and a host of industry agencies and companies in establishing the CRWA training program as it exists today for utility operators and managers. My goal is always to fulfill our member’s expectations and Cross Connection/Backflow training is one of the most requested topics in any training survey that has been done. So we started a training program and quickly found out that the misinformation about the certifications was incredible and the industry politics as complicated and layered as anything you will find in DC. I will not go into all the issues that came up but the issues led us down the road of not only offering training but also into offering our own Backflow Testers certification.

I would like to make an attempt at clearing up some of the issues and answer some FAQ’s that we get here at CRWA about tester certification and training:

Does the State recognize or approve your certification program?

Testers Certification – Tester certification programs vary from state to state but the difference here in California is that the state (CDPH) does not administer a backflow certification program. Any agency for that matter any person can start a certification program as long as the program meets basic recommended criteria and can demonstrate competency in testing backflow preventers. The certification program needs to only test those with the appropriate CDPH contact hour training (40 Hours), use a written exam (preferable 100 questions) and perform a hands on test with one proctor testing one student one at a time and testing on all the usual devices.

Who Approves Certification Programs - This question is interesting because believe it or not it is county by county in this state and Title 17 also gives the water purveyor the right to approve or not approve certifications from any certifying body, in some parts of the state AWWA is accepted and accepted in other parts its ABPA, in the north state its NCBPA along with either of AWWA or ABPA. I have some systems say that county health only accepts a certain certification but not others, by my read in Title 17 it goes back to the water purveyor. I can tell you from my experience the state will not and does not endorse, approve, or promote tester certification programs they will list the basic recommended criteria which is a 3 step criteria for a certification program:

- 1.** Student or candidate passing an initial written exam that includes a list of specific topics related to testing and the different assemblies.

2. Passing a performance exam (i.e. hands on) that demonstrates the candidate is proficient in accurately determining and reporting the condition of an RP, DC, PVB, and SVB assemblies under properly or improperly working conditions etc... Utilizing the USC's 9th or 10th edition.

3. Recertification should be required no less frequently than every three years, with the written and performance examinations covering the same subjects as the initial exam.

CDPH also recommends the certifying body maintain a current listing of certified testers along with expiration dates preferably available on a website. If you establish that your certification program meets the criteria listed above than viola, you too can offer your own Tester Certification program. **The department (CDPH) will generally recognize a candidate that has successfully completed a course from any certification program that demonstrates to the department the criteria listed above for their certification program.**

Which certification should I get?

You have a lot of choices out there for your certification do you go with ABPA, AWWA, ASSE, Northern California Backflow Prevention Association (NCBPA). The first question you should ask yourself is why do I want to be a tester? If you want to go into business then you need to check and see what certifications are generally accepted in the area where you will be doing business and you should also plan on getting multiple certifications so you can provide those certifications that the systems and your customers want. If you just want to satisfy the primacy requirements then you as the water purveyor can make that choice but it should be an informed decision based on the expectations locally but ultimately you can choose, always check with your local primacy to see what their requirements might be. In many cases water districts will get together and contract with a local primacy agency to administer a backflow program in that area in a lot of cases the local primacy agency mistakenly assumes they have control over all the area and can determine what certifications are acceptable based on the contracts they have with certain agencies. This situation will also add an element of confusion. If you want to get your certification to make your resume more attractive to potential employers then again you need to investigate what is common to the area you work and what are the local expectations and I would plan on getting multiple certifications.

What training is required for taking the certification and where should I get it?

You can get training from various training providers all over the state there are companies with mobile units, companies like CRWA that have full wet labs and class rooms. What's required is a 40 hour course that covers at least the following using USC's 9th or 10th edition as the reference for information:

- Basic hydraulics
- Theory and principle of backflow
- California cross-connection control codes and regs
- Field test equipment-type and when to verify accuracy

- Record keeping
- Field testing procedures for all the main types of devices
- Trouble shooting devices

The problem operators are having is finding a training course where you can actually take the exam upon completion of the course that week at that facility. There are many places that offer the training but not the exam so you have to then find a place to take the exam preferably right after you have received the training. As one of our recent training attendee's stated "it's a logistics nightmare" Those classes that do offer the training with an exam at the completion of training won't offer the exam until Saturday which requires a lot of extra costs in staying over not to mention the time away from weekend family activities. Here are some things to consider when making your decisions on training providers:

- Select the training course that will best prepare you to take the certifications that you feel you need in your area.
- Be sure the training provider offers the exam with the training course or there is an exam very soon after you have received training so you can be at your best when taking the certification tests.
- Be sure the training provider can assist you with testing registrations all of the certifications offered have a separate test or exam fee usually ranging from \$100.00 to \$200.00. Don't assume that you are automatically registered for the exam just because you signed up for the training.
- Be sure the training provider understands the testing requirements for your certification.
- Select a training company that provides a lot of hands on practice time in the wet lab and allows you to stay after class and practice.
- Select the training provider that will support you even after the training class is over some training providers will allow you to utilize their training facilities to practice before exams if you have been through their training.
- Select the training providers that will schedule the exam on Friday so you can complete the process and still be home that evening.

In my journey down the road to establishing a CRWA cross connection training program we have encountered all of these issues and more. Recently we decided to join in a partnership with The Northern California Backflow Prevention Association (NCBPA). CRWA will no longer be offering a separate certification but will still be offering the training that will qualify you for any of the certifications that you would like to take, but we will offer the NCBPA Examination for backflow testers. These exams will be given on Friday after completing the training course our wet lab facilities are open until 9:00pm for you to practice each day after class and at 6:30 am for you morning people. CRWA also provides continental breakfast, a full lunch, and afternoon snacks each day with every training registration. Please see the Executive Directors report for more information on our new Partnership with NCBPA.

I hope you look into getting your Testers certification and then following it up with a Cross Connection Control Specialist certification which I will outline in the next magazine. Please give us a call if you have any questions about our Backflow Testers training program here at CRWA.