

Water Treatment Operator

Run the plant that makes tap water safe, or the one that cleans what goes down the drain. A licensed job you can start straight from high school.

TYPICAL PAY

\$60,020

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$39k to \$91k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

up to 2 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Drinking water plants, wastewater plants, pump stations, labs, contr...

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma or equivalent** Grade 12
Chemistry and math are the useful ones. Mechanical aptitude matters as much as grades.
- 2 Get hired as an operator in training** Weeks to months
City public works departments, utility districts and private water companies hire entry operators and train them. Apply directly to the utility.
- 3 Learn the plant** 6 to 24 months
Sampling and testing water, reading gauges, adjusting chemical feed, logging everything, and fixing pumps and valves.
- 4 Pass your first state certification** Year 1 to year 2
The entry grade exam covers treatment processes, math, safety and the regulations. Your state sets the required hours before you can sit it.
- 5 Climb the grades** 5 to 15 years
Each higher grade needs more logged experience and another exam, and qualifies you to run a larger plant. Chief operator is the top of the ladder.

Pros and cons

- + Paid from day one with no degree and no debt
- + A real state license that raises your pay each grade
- + Public employer, pension and genuine job security
- Shift work, including nights, weekends and holidays
- Wastewater plants smell, and that is not a joke
- Small plants can be lonely, with one person on duty

Good to know

A third of the water workforce can retire

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that roughly one-third of the water sector workforce is eligible to retire within 10 years. Utilities know it, which is why they are running apprenticeships...

The federal government is paying to fill these jobs

In 2024 the Environmental Protection Agency handed out more than \$20 million through a water infrastructure workforce grant program to 13 organizations, specifically to recruit and train people into water job...

Optional boosts

The other side of the fence. Distribution and collection. Backflow prevention tester. Laboratory analyst.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Water and Wastewater Treatment Plant and System Operators (51-8031.00)

Environmental Protection Agency: the water sector workforce

American Water Works Association

Office of Water Programs, Sacramento State: operator training courses

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/water-treatment-operator>



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