The Utility of the Future Today -2026

Submit applications online at https://wef.secure-platform.com/a/solicitations/405/home

Contents

Application Information

ELIGIBILITY

- Public and private water-sector utilities of all sizes that meet the application requirements are encouraged to apply.
- Applicants must have no significant violations of their National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit requirements in the year preceding the application date. If specific questions arise regarding a significant violation, applicants are encouraged to contact their state NPDES point of contact for further information. If the state has not been delegated authority to operate the NPDES program, applicants should contact their NPDES point of contact in the EPA Regional Office.

Application Requirements

Applicants should submit the required documentation for this application package via the online application platform at https://wef.secure-platform.com/a/solicitations/405/home by 11:59 PM Eastern Time on May 14, 2026. Attachments, graphics, charts, photos, and videos are accepted as part of an application package. Videos may not exceed 500 MB. Instructions for completing the application are provided below. If you have questions about the application, please contact UtilityRecognition@wef.org.

Basis for Recognition

Successful applicants will demonstrate that they are engaged in developing and growing an Organizational Culture that supports Utility of the Future Today implementation and advancement in one of the Activity Areas below. Many of these Activity Areas align with the principles of a Circular Water Economy to reduce, recover, and regenerate, which are noted in parentheses.

- Energy Efficiency (Reduce)
- Beneficial Biosolids Reuse (Recover)
- Energy Generation & Recovery (Recover)
- Nutrient Reduction & Materials Recovery (Recover)
- Water Reuse (Recover)
- Watershed Stewardship (Regenerate)
- Partnering and Engagement

According to WEF, a Circular Water Economy is an integrated approach to water management that emphasizes reducing waste, recovering resources such as nutrients and energy, and regenerating natural systems. It reframes water as a renewable resource rather than a consumable and promotes closing the loop across municipal, industrial, and agricultural systems.

Notification and Presentation of Recognition

Applicants will be informed of recognition decisions by June 11, 2026. On September 29, 2026, a ceremony to celebrate honorees will be held at WEFTEC 2026 in New Orleans, LA. Recognized utilities will receive a Utility of the Future Today banner, a 2026 flag, and a Certificate of Recognition. Recipients are not required to attend the ceremony to receive recognition.

Duration of Recognition

Utility of the Future Today recognition is granted for three years – this applies to both the Organizational Culture narrative (Application Part 2) and the selected Activity Area (Application Part 3). After three years, utilities must reapply to renew their recognition by 1) demonstrating advancements in Organizational Culture and 2) either demonstrating advancement in a previously recognized Activity Area or applying in a new (not previously recognized) Activity Area.

Additional Activity Area Recognition

Over the two years following recognition, utilities can enhance their recognition by submitting a new application that describes one additional Activity Area each year. A new Organizational Culture narrative is not required; however, the previously submitted narrative must be included in the online application for scoring.

For example, a utility recognized in 2023 in the Watershed Stewardship Activity Area may apply for augmented recognition in 2024 and 2025 for one additional activity area per year by submitting materials only for that Activity Area plus the original Organizational Culture narrative. In 2026, the utility may reapply to renew its recognition for another three years.

Sponsoring organizations reserve the right to withdraw recognition from any recipient at any time.

Application Part 1: Background Information

Utility Description (combine all plants if a multi-site system)		
Utility Name:		
Type (e.g., single plant, regional system, multiple plants, collection or distribution system only, stormwater, etc.):		
Service Area (square miles):		Average Annual Daily Flow or Demand (MGD):
Population Served:		
Location		
Street Address:		
City: State:		Country:
Zip Code/Country Code:		
Utility Representative Point of Contact for Future Correspondence		
Name:	Phone:	Email:
If another entity has prepared this application on behalf of the utility, provide the information of the preparer below		
Name:	Title:	Contact Information (phone or email):

Previous Recognition

If this utility has previously received recognition, please indicate the year(s).

- ❑ 2016
- ❑ 2017
- ❑ 2018
- ❑ 2019
- ❑ 2020
- ❑ 2021
- ❑ 2022
- ❑ 2023
- ❑ 2024
- ❑ 2025

Application Part 2: Organizational Culture Narrative

The organizational culture narrative demonstrates how your utility's leadership, workforce, and values shape how the organization serves its people and community, creating the foundation for operational excellence, partnership, and long-term sustainability, including advancement of Circular Water Economy practices. Each application must include a narrative describing the utility's overall operational philosophy.

Topics to consider:

- Leadership, workforce development, and organizational values that support employee engagement, learning, and innovation
- Product/service quality, operational optimization, and long-term financial viability
- Enterprise resiliency, infrastructure strategy, and community sustainability
- The utility's role as an Anchor Institution supporting equitable and inclusive outcomes
- How organizational culture enables Circular Water Economy practices, including reduction, recovery, and regenerative strategies
- Leveraging technology (e.g., AI, digital tools) to support operational performance, decision-making, and sustainability outcomes

The narrative should be between 500 and 1500 words. Appendices 1 and 2 provide examples of practices and measures relevant to Organizational Culture, including the role of an Anchor Institution. If your utility has been recognized previously and the current application is for a new Activity Area, please resubmit your Organizational Narrative.

Organizational Culture is the backbone of a Utility of the Future Today. An organization's culture defines behavioral norms within the organization and within the community it serves. This culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders and then communicated and reinforced through various methods, ultimately shaping employee perceptions, behaviors, and understanding. It also includes how the organization makes decisions and treats its customers.

A UotFT organization has created and continues to grow and evolve an Organizational Culture that focuses on people within the utility and the community served. People within the utility provide and focus on continuously improving their skills, services, and organizational performance. People throughout the organization feel respected by their leadership, with employee engagement

strong at all levels. The UotFT culture encourages self-improvement, learning, innovation, collaboration, and workforce/workplace flexibility, and helps address Triple Bottom Line community-wide economic, environmental, and social outcomes. The benefits of becoming a UotFT include enhancing the organization's ability to attract, retain, and develop top-notch water-sector leaders and staff who can facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision.

The UotFT serves as an "Anchor Institution" in the community. It is invested in the community's quality of life by providing leadership within the community, being an employer of choice, investing in placemaking, providing community education, and being a compassionate service provider, ensuring all customers receive equitable services to produce equitable outcomes regardless of income. Above all, an anchor institution is committed to optimizing environmental and public health outcomes for those it serves.

Application Part 3: Activity Area Description

Each applicant is required to submit a description demonstrating robust engagement in one of the following Activity Areas:

- **Energy Efficiency** (Reduce) – Reducing the energy used to provide water and wastewater services
- **Beneficial Biosolids Reuse** (Recover) – Reusing treated solids to improve soil health, sequester carbon, and replace synthetic fertilizers
- **Energy Generation & Recovery** (Recover) – Harnessing energy from wastewater
- **Nutrient Reduction & Materials Recovery** (Recover) – Extracting and reusing valuable nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus
- **Water Reuse** (Recover) – Using treated wastewater for agricultural, municipal, and industrial purposes
- **Watershed Stewardship** (Regenerate) – Protecting and revitalizing water sources
- **Partnering and Engagement** – Building and sustaining cross-sector partnerships that advance shared environmental, economic, and social goals; Engaging customers and community stakeholders through transparent communication, education, and co-creation; Serving as a trusted community asset and anchor institution.

The description should be no more than 2000 words and include three main components.

1. Overview Paragraph: Describe the practices/actions/programs your utility has engaged in relative to the chosen Activity Area. For reference, a list of example practices is included in Appendix 1. This list is not meant to be comprehensive but instead demonstrates the types of actions that could be included in the scope of each area. Please include no more than 1-2 sentences per action described in this section.
2. Question & Answer: Please respond to the questions listed below in as much detail as possible to guide other utilities seeking to learn from your experiences and implement similar actions/practices in their systems.
    a. How did you implement the practices/actions/programs described in your Overview Paragraph?
    b. What type and level of resources were needed to support implementation? (e.g., financial, staff, other)
    c. Did you partner with other stakeholders or organizations in your

implementation process?

d. What was the most critical obstacle your utility had to overcome to succeed in this Activity Area, and how did you do that?
e. Has "smart" information technology supported your implementation/optimization in this area? If yes, please describe.
f. Where could other utilities go to find additional information on this Activity Area or the actions/practices/programs you implemented?

Performance Measures & Results: Using the table below, please describe the measures you use to gauge performance in this Activity Area, including the targets you set for each measure and your actual outcomes. For your reference, Appendix 2 lists example measures for each Activity Area.

Measure *What are you measuring?*	**Targets** *What was your goal/intended outcome?*	**Outcomes** *What were your actual outcomes?*

Definitions of Activity Areas

Energy Efficiency (Reduce)

Energy Efficiency involves reducing a utility's overall energy use to lower inputs and emissions within the Circular Water Economy. A utility is more energy efficient when it delivers more services with the same amount of energy or if the same services require less energy through process optimization.

Beneficial Biosolids Reuse (Recover)

Wastewater-produced biosolids can be beneficially used to close material loops in the Circular Water Economy. Applications include supporting agriculture, silviculture, and horticulture; fire restoration and general landscape maintenance through land application; and the production of circular, marketable products such as compost, amended topsoil, or construction products (e.g., bricks, roadbed); and land reclamation as a substitute for other fill materials. This Activity Area does not include using biosolids to produce energy or recovering resources from biosolids.

Energy Generation & Recovery (Recover)
Energy Generation & Recovery captures efforts to minimize the use of non-renewable (fossil-based) energy, generate renewable (green) energy to the maximum practicable extent, and recover thermal, chemical, and hydraulic energy from water systems to the maximum practicable extent. In doing so, the water Utility of the Future will seek to optimize its water quality performance, decarbonize operations, reduce its vulnerability to climate change, and better manage energy costs and requirements through integrated resource recovery.

Nutrient Reduction & Materials Recovery (Recover)
Nutrient reduction focuses on cost-effective and efficient strategies to reduce nutrient discharges, close nutrient loops, and protect receiving waters. Utilities of the Future of all sizes will use creative operational protocols and innovative technologies to reduce nutrients discharged into the environment. Materials recovery is the extraction of ammonia, phosphorus, nitrogen compounds, metals, and other marketable commodities during the treatment process. It includes lower-tech activities such as recycling/reusing/repurposing paper, pallets, containers, and other materials that otherwise would be “wasted”, keeping materials in circulation and avoiding disposal.

Water Reuse (Recover)
Water Reuse covers opportunities to use treated water for beneficial purposes, such as irrigation for agriculture and landscaping, industrial processes, toilet flushing, surface/groundwater augmentation, fire protection, buffering, saltwater intrusion, and human consumption. Effective water reuse offsets freshwater withdrawals, preserves valuable resources, and can provide cost savings and resilience benefits.

Watershed Stewardship (Regenerate)
Watersheds are geographic areas that channel drainage into a river or stream system. Watershed Stewardship refers to utility investments and actions to improve water flow (reduced flooding/increased local capture) and quality conditions outside the traditional utility span of infrastructure operations and control, supporting regenerative outcomes. It includes activities such as urban Green Stormwater Infrastructure investments, conservation easements to preserve the ecosystem functions of undeveloped lands, stream channel restoration, enhancing recharge, and community resilience while avoiding waste.

Partnering & Engagement
Partnering is collaboration with stakeholders to enable the utility to meet its Utility

of the Future Today goals while enhancing the overall environmental, economic, and social well-being of the stakeholders and the community at large. Partnering between utilities (peer-to-peer exchange), whether offering or seeking such opportunities to advance utility performance, including, but not exclusive to, Utility of the Future Today goals, falls into this activity area.

Engagement is the interaction with customers and other stakeholders to provide ongoing opportunities for dialogue, communication, and education related to utility operations and the value of water and utility services. Through partnering and engagement, the utility proactively engages with stakeholders and community decision-makers to promote itself as a valued, competent, and trustworthy community asset.

Application Part 4: Certification Statement

*I,*_____[PRINT NAME]*, an approved representative of*

*my organization,*_____[ORGANIZATION NAME], *certify all data and information provided in this application package is accurate to the best of my organization's knowledge and has not been falsified. I certify that my organization is in good standing and has had no significant permit violations in the 12 months preceding the submission date of this application package.*

_____

[UTILITY REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE] [DATE]

If another entity has prepared this application on behalf of the utility, preparer sign below:

_____

[PREPARER SIGNATURE]

_____ [DATE]

Appendix 1: Example Activities

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Internal Culture

- Leadership proactively engaged in both internal organizational and broader discussions with community leaders on critical community priorities
- Effective Utility Management (EUM)-based continuous improvement program in place
- Business focus that delivers the best environmental, economic, and community outcomes consistent with community values and needs
- Inclusive, participatory, and collaborative culture established, dedicated to continual learning, improvement, and innovation
- Workforce and leadership development program (that includes leadership and management skills training in support of formal and informal leadership opportunities) in place to ensure recruitment, retention, and continuous competency of utility staff in support of the utility's mission and community expectations
- Provides formal or informal mentoring for young (and seasoned) professionals to attract and retain top talent through commitment to their professional development and a supportive, encouraging culture
- Shares work experiences (including internal "peer-to-peer" partnering), ensures internal understanding, and provides more significant support for the utility's key strategy related to the Utility of the Future business model
- Establishes "peer-to-peer" relationships and actively partners with other utilities to offer and/or seek opportunities to advance the Utility of the Future goals broadly across the water sector
- Job enhancement and enrichment opportunities are available through a variety of standard and innovative job scope-broadening techniques that support a strong business succession and overall integration of organizational spirit
- A tuition refund program is in place to encourage employee career advancement
- Problem-solving is encouraged at all levels, and accepted solutions

are adequately funded and supported for successful implementation
- Develops an integrated and well-coordinated senior leadership team
- Employs integrated organizational communications systems
- Opportunities provided for employees to find and fix inefficiencies and share ideas for solutions to problems
- Awareness and commitment to workplace safety established as a key organizational expectation
- Organizational successes are celebrated and recognized
- Process established for periodic tracking of progress toward meeting goals and milestones around organizational Utility of the Future Today commitments Mentoring program or other informal engagement with other utilities to help address key challenges and promote Utility of the Future practices established as an organizational practice
- Employees are recognized and rewarded for suggesting improvements that save time, money, resources, and/or improve outcomes
- The organization adopts core values aligned with community needs and desires
- Intentionally accounts for and takes corrective action on factors that have previously led to disparate levels of opportunity, employment, investment, and utility service outcomes
- Leadership actively seeks employee engagement opportunities, including developing and implementing the organization's Strategic Business Plan, core values, and annual/biannual budget
- Stresses organizational efficiency by supporting decision-making authority and responsibility at the lowest appropriate level in the organization
- The organization has a compelling and inspirational vision and mission that describes its desired organizational culture
- The organization is advancing the use of innovations in artificial intelligence

Leadership in Community, including Examples of Anchor Institution Activities:

- Cultivates trusted and collaborative community partnerships and serves as a community convener to advance shared utility and community goals and expand the collective impact of decisions and investments

- Maximizes employment opportunities within the community through contracting and procurement, and through education, training, apprenticeship, and strategic investment programs
- Creates investment policies, programs, and practices that achieve multiple community benefits across a broad range of social, economic, and environmental community goals.
- Authors policies and evaluates programs and services to intentionally determine whether impacts and outcomes are disproportionate, or otherwise unduly burden your most marginalized communities
- Leadership proactively engaged with community leaders on critical community priorities
- Major capital and operating investments integrate both community priorities and Triple Bottom Line decision-making into the selection of investment alternatives that provide the greatest benefit-to-cost ratio, such as the Augmented Alternatives Analysis (AAA) or Envision Sustainable Infrastructure decision-making process
- Provide active civic leadership and participates in and adds to the community's quality of life
- Seeks to create co-benefits in the community, watershed, and region, including multi-benefit capital infrastructure investments that also create community value (E.g., parks/soccer fields above underground wet weather storage basins)
- Support community and economic development in the region through partnerships and collaborations
- Provides job creation and contracting opportunities in the community.
- Builds an effective and demographically representative workforce pipeline
- Beneficially impacts employment practices of service providers, suppliers, and construction contractors
- Incubates local and regional workforce through strategic economic investment
- Develop partnerships that link community well-being to utility health, such as participation in innovative solutions (i.e. wastewater surveillance)
- Encourage enhanced public access and green space adjacent to utility facilities

- Creates/staffs a physical center or culturally appropriate education program on the value of water and wastewater services in protecting the environment and public health, while reducing disproportionate impacts of our changing climate
- Advances public health through wastewater surveillance initiatives
- Provides resources, knowledge, and capacity to assist its community with projects that benefit the community, such as applying for funding or permits, that the community might not have the ability to accomplish on its own
- Serves as a community liaison to other governmental divisions or agencies when problems arise, such as reaching out to public works or the electric utilities, when there are challenges that the community may lack the capacity or expertise to address

Appendix 2: Additional Examples of Performance Measures & Results

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: The following measures demonstrate how utilities can assess the values, leadership practices, and workforce engagement that drive innovation, collaboration, and continuing improvement.

- Number of training sessions, % of individuals trained, and type of leadership/workforce development activities conducted (e.g., safety training, resource stewardship)
- Internal leadership and supervisory training programs in place that embed Circular Water Economy principles
- Apprenticeship programs
- Mentoring programs in place
- Level of employee engagement in the goals and vision of the Utility of the Future Today business model and the Circular Water Economy
- Active wellness program
- Number of open positions that internal candidates can qualify for through employee training and enrichment programs
- Resource efficiency improvements related to staff utilization
- Employee job satisfaction (percent based on a comprehensive employee survey)
- Continuous improvement in employee engagement
- The percentage of vacancies filled through the promotion of in-house candidates
- Peer-to-peer utility partnering program in place

ACTIVITY AREAS:

ENERGY EFFICIENCY (REDUCE)

- KWh reductions in site energy use/intensity – to date or anticipated in the future (e.g., change in energy required per million gallons treated or change in energy required per hour of pump operation)
- Translation of energy use/intensity reductions to greenhouse gas emission reductions – to date and anticipated in the future, supporting decarbonization in the Circular Water Economy
- Current and anticipated investment (in USD) in energy efficiency projects or activities and anticipated savings (in USD)
- USD value of other reinvestments enabled by savings from reduced

energy costs

- Percent of annual budget allocated to implementing priority energy efficiency improvements identified in an energy audit
- Targeted efforts to support energy efficiency within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

BENEFICIAL BIOSOLIDS USE (RECOVER)

- Percent of biosolids beneficially used vs. total volume produced on an annual basis
- Quantification of natural resources conserved through substitution (e.g., pounds of phosphorus or other fertilizers substituted for by biosolids)
- Demonstrated performance against projected performance in business cases and end-use markets (e.g., actual versus projected biosolids volume acquired for soil amendment by agricultural producers)
- Tons of carbon sequestered in the soil via land application of Class A and/or Class B biosolids and associated greenhouse gas reductions
- Impact on customer rates
- Increase in agricultural land application supporting nutrient loop closure
- Increase in silviculture land application supporting soil regeneration
- Increase in agricultural or silviculture growth yields relevant to biosolids reuse
- Increase in improved soil characteristics resulting from biosolids-amended soils
- Amount of biosolids used for landscaping for green infrastructure projects and land reclamation
- Amount of biosolids used for recreational fields, golf courses, and domestic use with documented compliance
- Targeted efforts to support beneficial biosolids reuse within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

ENERGY GENERATION & RECOVERY (RECOVER)

- Reduced non-renewable energy use and carbon footprint (e.g., percent of non-renewable energy use reduction, percent of greenhouse gas emissions reduction), advancing decarbonization within the Circular Water Economy
- Reduced reliance on the power grid (e.g., percent reduction of energy

utilization coming from the grid), and corresponding reduced vulnerability to changing weather patterns or climate and energy price fluctuations
- Cost savings (e.g., return on investment proceeds and/or avoided energy costs) and lifecycle value creation
- Percent increase in renewable energy production (e.g., solar generation, biogas-to-energy, pressure recovery) or utilization (e.g., purchase of renewable energy through the grid) to close energy loops
- Amount of carbon sequestered and verified GHG reductions
- The amount of transmission losses eliminated when providing outside power to the facilities
- Increase in use of renewable energy sources, including Renewable Energy Credit generation, and/or percent of energy use that is renewable
- Percent of total plant power demand that is generated on-site from renewable sources
- Targeted efforts to support energy generation and recovery within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

NUTRIENT REDUCTION & MATERIALS RECOVERY (RECOVER)

- Type and percentage of materials recovered vs. materials available
- Revenue generated and/or costs avoided from materials recovery and marketing activities
- Demonstrated performance as projected in the market assessment
- Number of external and/or public-private partnerships for recovered material sales
- Cost avoided using advanced technology to achieve nutrient reductions (e.g., capital cost avoided through more efficient use of existing infrastructure)
- Targeted efforts to support nutrient reduction and material recovery within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

WATER REUSE (RECOVER)

- Water beneficially reused

    - Percent change of static water levels of a reservoir due to new actions (augmentation)
    - Ratio of reuse quantity vs. wastewater volume processed (normalized change)
- Environmental benefits
    - Amount of movement or reduction of saltwater front (in feet)
    - Amount of decreased diversion of freshwater from sensitive ecosystems
    - Area irrigated solely by recycled water
- Local supply
    - Reduced dependence on purchased water and energy used to treat purchased water
    - Climate-independent water supply of reused water
- Costs for, or sales of, treated water fit-for-purpose reuse
- Level of public acceptance of reuse commitments for non-potable opportunities
    - Use of advanced treatment (ultrafilters (UF), reverse osmosis (RO), granular activated carbon (GAC)
    - Type and use of enhanced disinfection of reused water besides chlorine residual, such as UV light
- Targeted efforts to support water reuse within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

WATERSHED STEWARDSHIP (REGENERATE)

- Reduction in wet weather impacts (e.g., flooding, CSOs, SSOs, gallons of infiltrated water not reaching collection systems)
- Reduced unit costs for water quality improvements (e.g., financial benefits of a water quality trade)
- Enhanced pollution mitigation (e.g., sediment captured through green stormwater infrastructure)
- Increased hydrologic stability (e.g., reduction in flood-prone land area)
- Reductions (e.g., VSAT Risk Reduction Units change) in vulnerability to climate change
- Created or enhanced wetlands and riparian habitats (e.g., number of projects, or acres covered)
- Ratepayer savings resulting from planning and projects between transportation and other public utilities
- Targeted efforts to support watershed stewardship within sectors or communities most in need of cost savings or technological advancements

PARTNERING & ENGAGEMENT

- Number and type of specific projects completed (e.g., rain gardens installed, innovative technologies, or other innovative practices adopted) associated with a partnership
- Number and type of formal recognitions of partnerships by outside groups (e.g., state or national award) and any associated results for the community (e.g., acres of green space added in the community)
- Performance improvements resulting from a partnership (e.g., reduced volume of flooding or reduced greenhouse gas emissions)
- Number of ongoing communications network actions/activities (e.g., website engagement, newsletters, social media activity)
- Type and number of working agreements and collaborative initiatives for growth planning between and across different levels of government
- Type and number of changes in operating practices of other partners (e.g., nonpoint source controls by agricultural producers, food producers, consumers)
- Level of community support for the benefits and costs of becoming a Utility of the Future (e.g., annual survey results regarding community support for utility priorities)
- Support from and amount of contracting with local businesses
- Level of stakeholder involvement in decisions that affect them
- Number of outreach events conducted to publicize and build support for water and wastewater services
- Type and number of collaborations on data collection and assessment
- Amount and effectiveness of public outreach as an integral part of project planning
- Number of active utility-to-utility partnerships (can be providing or receiving services/training/resources, etc., from another utility)
- Sustained effort to collaborate and partner with communities that historically have been underserved or underrepresented by or within the water industry

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