

AWRA Women in Water Resources Interview #1: Arlene Dietz



Arlene Dietz, AWRA's first woman president (1987).

This interview is the first of a six part series, written/conducted by AWRA President Martha Narvaez, celebrating the role of AWRA Women in Water Resources.

Length of Time in the Water Resources Field

I began work in the water resources field in 1968 and continue today as a volunteer, all totaling about 48 years.

Current Position

Retired from the USACE and currently the Manager/Owner of Rice Farms LLC where I grow 300 acres of hazelnuts in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Since retiring and returning to Oregon in 2005 I have served on Connect Oregon's Advisory Group to recommend projects connecting marine/intermodal systems to the rest of the transportation system in Oregon. I currently serve as the farm representative on the executive board of McKenzie Watershed Council and on the Policy Advisory Group for the State of Oregon's Integrated Water Resource Management Plan.

Positions Held

- University of Wisconsin Kenosha and Waukesha (taught Economics)
- US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE): North Central Division
- Chief of Economics, USACE Chicago District
- Institute for Water Resources (IWR) (managed many studies including the National Waterways Study which set the framework for many water policy decisions for Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) '86 and subsequent laws)
- Director of Navigation Data Center (NDC)(consolidated most all water data information programs in the Corps plus oversaw the historic Waterborne Commerce of the U.S. and Port Series)
- Acting Chief, Western Division of Planning, HQ; and Acting Director, IWR

Education

BA and MA in Economics with minors in Russian language and Geography.

Honors and Appointments

- Selected as Congressional Fellow by the American Political Science Association and worked for the Chairman of the Senate's Water Resources Sub-Committee. He oversaw preparation of WRDA '86.
- Designated a National Associate of the National Academy of Science (NAS), National Research Council.
- Selected Fellow of American Water Resources Association.
- Elected to Emeritus membership on two NAS Transportation Research Board (TRB) committees.
- Recognized as a Distinguished Alumnus of Willamette University.

Q&A

How did you get involved in the water resources field? I worked for the USACE Division, District, HQ, IWR and NDC. I served in most offices of AWRA's National Capital Section and on the national AWRA board, including chairman. I also chaired the NAS-TRB's Marine Group and the Policy, Planning and Administration Group, and several marine committees.

How did you get involved in with AWRA? My involvement with AWRA first began through writing a technical paper, which was in Chicago in the 1970s. When I moved to the Washington, D.C., area in 1977 a colleague at the Institute for Water Resources, Howard Olson, invited me to the local National Capital Section (NCS) meetings. The monthly luncheon meetings included a speaker addressing a timely topic. Annually, the chapter hosted a field trip as well. This section had a great mix of talented individuals from many agencies, many of whom I came to call my friends. I became active on the NCS board and was elected president. When the section undertook sponsorship of a national meeting in D.C., I chaired that meeting. This national meeting began my involvement with national AWRA.

How has the water resources field changed since you started your career? The field changed from being Engineer-centric to Bio-centric. It also changed from having just a few women in the field in the early 1980s to many today. Working to develop a true multidisciplinary focus 35 years ago, it appears to have moved though multi-disciplinary into today's Bio-centric focus.

How will the water resources field change in the next few years? It will continue to engage the grass-roots local level and the well-financed national NGOs. The government level will continue to be tied up in legal constraints. Hopefully, the professional water organization's focus on science, not emotion, will make inroads in decision making at all levels. Witnessing the bullying approaches, the guilt approaches, the shunning approaches and the "my way or the highway approaches" adopted by the "true" believers is frightening and is dangerous. Questioning science-based decisions places the scientist, government leaders, community leaders as well as public questioners in the cross-hairs, and that is from both sides of an issue!

Biggest career success? My success encompasses the numerous opportunities given to me at the local, regional and national levels of decision making. I have been blessed with working with truly enlightened water resources greats and dedicated professionals. I have enjoyed each new challenge whether it was establishing the first Economics' Branch in a district office to the great mix of Washington D.C., opportunities: the National Waterways Study; the U.S. Senate work on WRDAs; HQ leadership; establishing and guiding USACE's Navigation Data Center; contributing to AWRA leadership; or working with the remarkable scholars at NAS-TRB and IWR.

Biggest lesson learned in your career? My career's biggest lesson is that a share of personal humility has to be present along with the insistence on quality data, analysis and planning in order to reach a desired end, such as equitable and effective public policy (in my case both water and transportation policies).

Biggest regret? Probably not participating more actively in the international realm. I was pleased with the success of helping to integrate three nation's marine statistics when I served as Marine Chair of the North American Transportation Initiative.

Share a leadership story? When I was vice president of AWRA and Director at the Navigation Data Center, I seized on an idea championed by Rich Herbert, the educational water poster program. I was able to have the USACE help sponsor two posters with AWRA, plus support a USGS employee to work on associated teacher materials. As chair of Ports and Channel Committee and later the Marine Group at NAS-TRB I observed the lack of research initiatives on the marine environment; military transportation; marine human factors; and ferries and was able to create sub-committees which evolved into full committees. Locally on our watershed council I have proposed and had adopted the initiation of rules of conduct to facilitate productive meetings.

Biggest challenge as a woman in the business? Little did I know in the 1960s that one will occasionally need a champion. In my career I have had several such individuals: supporters and mentors who offered me unprecedented opportunities, guidance, and later I found out, their personal support. Howard Olson, then chief economist at USACE North Central Division hired me in 1968. He worked hard to ensure I had opportunities to learn about water resources and transportation economics. He introduced me to professional involvement in AWRA. General Drake

Wilson and his successor, General Hugh Robinson at USACE HQ pushed and supported me into a contentious Washington, D.C., leadership role: manager of the National Waterways Study. Robinson defended my appointment against the all-male USACE leadership who wanted control of that \$6 million congressional study.

One piece of advice you wish someone had shared early on in your career? Can't think of any...I had remarkable support and was ironically not influenced by the "women don't do that" attitude. Family, educators, mentors and numerous professionals all offered their continuing support to me.

True inspiration? "True" is a powerful word. I have always known through my parents, my educational guides, my mentors, my husband and children, and my followers, that honesty and finding the best in each individual brings out the "great" in everyone, and in doing so offers continual inspiration. Inspiration comes from those who surround you; therefore one must choose people of good character when there is a choice.

As mentioned, this is a six-part series on AWRA's Women in Water. Watch for next month's interview with [AWRA Board member Brenda Bateman](#).

Author Martha Narvaez is AWRA's President, email: president@awra.org