

ORANGE COUNTY SANITATION DISTRICT, CA

Wastewater 101 Citizens Academy

NEAA26 PUBLIC INFORMATION AND EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM



National Environmental
Achievement
AWARDS

WASTEWATER 101

CITIZENS' ACADEMY

- Launched in 2022
- Four-part online series held live; focusing on a different themes, from environmental protection to infrastructure investment
- Participants tour OC San's reclamation plants and pump station
- Interactive "Flushable Moments," which include trivia and polls



From 8 Graduates
in 2022 to

45

Graduates in 2025



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Member Spotlight: OC San’s Wastewater 101 Citizens Academy

When most people think about wastewater, they don’t imagine it as a topic of community pride or public education. But the Orange County Sanitation District’s (OC San) innovative Wastewater 101 Citizens Academy is changing that perception—one virtual session at a time.

Launched in 2022, the Academy is a free, four-part workshop series designed to demystify the complex world of wastewater treatment. Held live via Microsoft Teams, each two-hour session offers a behind-the-scenes look at how OC San safely treats 185 million gallons of wastewater every day for 2.6 million residents across central and northwestern Orange County, CA. Participants also have the option to tour OC San’s water reclamation plants and pump station in person as part of the program.

The program was born out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person outreach was paused. OC San’s Public Affairs Office saw an opportunity to connect with the community in a new way—by creating a virtual academy that was informative, interactive, and accessible. The result: A curriculum built in-house with input from in-house experts, all aimed at making technical topics understandable and engaging.

Each session focuses on a different theme, from environmental protection to infrastructure investment. Interactive “Flushable Moments” which include trivia and polls keep things lively, while pre- and post-session surveys help OC San continuously improve the experience.

The Academy has grown rapidly—from just 8 graduates in its pilot session to 42 in spring 2025. Participants have joined from across California and even out of state, drawn by the program’s flexibility and relevance. Graduates receive a certificate of completion and are recognized at OC San Board meetings, reinforcing the agency’s commitment to transparency and civic engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, the Academy empowers residents to become informed advocates for water and wastewater issues. As one participant put it, “Every Orange County resident should know about the work OC San does every day.”

With minimal costs and maximum impact, OC San’s Wastewater 101 Citizens Academy is a model for how public agencies can educate, engage, and inspire their communities—one flush at a time.