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Mac McKee Retires as Utah Water Research Lab’s Longest Serving Director

News Release — Oct. 16, 2019 — The people who work and study at the Utah Water Research Lab will remember outgoing director Mac McKee in many different ways.

• UWRL Director, 2003–2019
• Worked in 30 countries
• Founded AggieAir remote sensing program
• Mentored 13 MS students and 14 PhD students
• Added 11,000-square-foot Hydraulics Modeling Lab

Some will remember his famous email signature line — six bullet points that summarize the career of a water resources engineer. Number three on the list warns that time and resources available for a public works project are usually insufficient. “So suck it up and deal!” writes McKee, his unmistakable sense of humor and administrative style coming through in every email he sends.

Others will remember McKee’s thoughtful consideration of Water Lab personnel and the way he offers help when trouble or tragedy strike.

Dr. Mac McKee Retires as Utah Water Research Lab’s Longest-Serving Director.

“He cares about people,” says longtime Water Lab staff member and McKee’s administrative assistant Jan Urroz. “He’s always been very fair. From the tenured faculty to the hourly custodians, you can tell he cares about people. He always offers a listening heart.”

And others will remember McKee as a tireless champion of the importance of water resources to modern society. A self-described “concrete and rebar engineer” by training, McKee ushered the Water Lab through 16 years of change and growth. He created new jobs and added 11,000 square feet of research space to the UWRL campus.

“Mac has always been a forward-thinking person who appreciates new ideas and who pushes the boundaries to make things happen,” said fellow water resources professor and dean of the College of Engineering Jagath Kaluarachchi. He touted McKee as a confident leader who took a visionary risk to ensure the Water Lab’s position as a leading research institution.

“When Mac took the bold step of financing the construction of a second hydraulics lab without state or university funding — and to pay off the loan with money generated from new contracts — that was a bold move,” said Kaluarachchi. “He successfully paid off the loan ahead of time and demonstrated that unimaginable tasks are possible at this university.”

In addition to the hundreds of research efforts he directed at the lab and the work he performed in 30 countries, McKee will likely be remembered as the founder of AggieAir, USU’s premier unmanned aerial vehicle remote sensing program.

Today, AggieAir is one of the most prominent aerial remote sensing platforms in the country. This summer AggieAir researchers teamed with NASA for a high-profile test of autonomous aerial vehicle traffic in Reno, Nevada.

“By combining scientific data collection and processing with autonomous flight methods, Dr. McKee has made a substantial contribution to remote sensing,” said Cal Coopmans, assistant professor of electrical engineering and director of the AggieAir program. “He has shown how scientific aerial sensing can help improve farming and conserve water resources in the 21st century.”

Research played a central role in McKee’s career, but colleagues are quick to highlight his unwavering commitment to student success.
“He’s mentored students like I’ve never seen,” said Urroz. “There was a time when one of our faculty had to leave, and Mac took on all those additional students. All this while he had his own students and research program to take care of. Mac was the one who said, ‘I’ve got to be there for those students, and I’m going to see them through. They all finished their PhDs and went out into the world and did wonderful things.

“I hear it over and over again: He makes everyone else’s job easier because of his work ethic and his style of management. He makes everyone else’s job easier because he’s a man of his word. He follows up on everything he says he’s going to do.”