For nearly 35 years, Mark E. Felag has worked for the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (DOT) as an engineer. He joined the agency in 1984 as an entry-level engineer and in 1987 became acting materials engineer. For most of the past 30 years he has served in a management capacity, supervising up to 70 employees.

“A highlight of my career is that I have had the privilege of working with many outstanding, dedicated people. I have worked on the entire Rhode Island statewide network—and indirectly on almost all state facilities across the country—in my standards and research work over the years,” Felag notes.

In 1988, the original Strategic Highway Research Program was initiated. “I was the state coordinator and helped implement Superpave™ and other products,” Felag comments. “We were the first state to implement independent testing on a system basis; all other states used a project-based approach. This made us more efficient and we set up one of the nation's first comparison check of results with tolerances.” Rhode Island also was one of the first states to use self-compacting concrete for structural applications and to use thin-lift pavements for Interstate construction.

In 2016, Felag joined the planning office to work on bicycle planning and, in 2018, the transit office. In this role he works closely with cities and towns on subrecipient projects, and on an asset management program for shared-use bike paths.

“In my work, I find it is very important to talk to people and learn from them. I learned about this in high school, from a teacher who stated that even the lowest salaried worker will know more things about something than someone higher up in an organization,” Felag muses. “Although we can get by on conference calls, we still need to talk face-to-face at times. By talking directly, you can delve deeper into ideas and thoughts. Diverse backgrounds also will produce greater ideas and opportunities for improvements.”

Felag takes pride in his 30 years serving on TRB committees. “I heard about the good works of TRB and began going to the Annual Meeting in 1987,” he notes, adding that he has not missed a year since. “I have learned so much from TRB meetings implementing and following through with the AASHTO–ASTM Harmonization Task Force has been a huge success with national significance,” Felag comments. Historically, he explains, manufacturers of cement produced two different products for normal cement usage—an AASHTO version and ASTM version. The task force, working with National Cooperative Highway Research Program Project D18-11, aligned these two major cement specifications.

“At the onset, I stated the harmonization task would only work if we remove our biases and truly look at both organizations’ specifications in a new light,” Felag recalls. “The research on this worked because it answered a question that was very much needed and produced a product that could be implemented. Isn’t that what research should be?”

Felag’s membership on TRB and AASHTO committees helped pave the way for research implementation. “In our Concrete Materials meetings, we would talk and discuss our most pressing issue that to be addressed,” he notes. “A statement was written up and then forwarded to AASHTO. Since I was an AASHTO chair, I would be able to promote it and make others see the need for it. This helped us get many projects approved over the last 5 years.”

At national meetings, Felag may recite a poem or sing a song he has written. “I do this to lighten the meetings up a bit and deliver a message. My poems or songs reflect a position, present an overview of the meeting, recognize someone, or give thanks to those on the committee for their work,” he comments. In 2014, he compiled a collection of the songs in a document called “Standards in a Spec Book: A Collection of Songs and Poems.” He also conducts outreach to students to promote engineering and safety, visiting classrooms as the character P.E. Pothole.