

INDUSTRY WHITEPAPER

The Definitive Guide to Commercial Irrigation

Practical strategy for hiring, verifying, and retaining irrigation installers, designers, backflow specialists, and PMs — for a trade the BLS has no dedicated occupation code for.

Nobody has ever handed me a clean BLS code for "irrigation technician." That's exactly the problem.

I'm Michael Carter, President of My Trade Talent. Commercial irrigation is one of the trickiest labor markets we recruit for — not because it's short on people, but because the trade itself doesn't sit inside a single, clean government classification. Ask the Bureau of Labor Statistics for "irrigation technician" and you get nothing. Ask a job board and you get a pile of resumes that mostly can't tell you which of four different professional credentials — if any — the person actually holds.

What I've learned running pipelines in this trade is that the labor market itself is smaller than most of the ones we work in, but the hiring pressure inside it is real and, in the tracked search data, actually leads rather than trails salary curiosity. That's a different pattern than a lot of niche trades show, and it changes how you should think about building a bench for this work.

This guide is what I wish someone had handed me before I ever tried to staff an irrigation crew: what the labor market actually looks like, what CIT/CIC/CID/CLIA certifications really verify, the ten roles that matter most, and a hiring process built around verification instead of hope.

The five things to take away if you read nothing else.

- **There is no dedicated BLS occupation for "irrigation technician."** Most installation, service, and controller work is folded into Grounds Maintenance Workers (SOC 37-3011); backflow prevention and main-line work on larger commercial systems crosses into licensed plumbing scope, closer to Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters (SOC 47-2152).
- **This is a small labor market by search volume — but not the smallest one we track.** Total tracked keyword volume runs around 1,170 searches a month across the trade; of the ten trades in this rollout, only insulation runs smaller (roughly 350/mo).
- **Hiring intent leads the search data here, not salary curiosity.** The jobs/job-description/near-me cluster runs roughly 480 combined monthly searches — the largest of the three tracked clusters, ahead of both the certification cluster (~350/mo) and the salary cluster (~320/mo).
- **"Certified" means very little without knowing which certification.** CIT, CIC, CID, and CLIA are four distinct Irrigation Association credentials with different entry requirements, exams, and scopes — plus a separate ASSE 5110 credential for backflow testing tied to plumbing licensure.
- **This is a trade with real seasonal turnover pressure** heading into and out of the irrigation season, and few standing pipelines built for it — which is exactly where a maintained bench outperforms reactive posting.

INTRODUCTION

A trade the government doesn't track on its own terms is still a trade you have to staff.

Commercial irrigation contractors we talk to describe a specific frustration: there's no single job board category, no single BLS wage table, and no single certification that captures what a "good hire" looks like for this work. Installers, designers, backflow specialists, foremen, and PMs all draw on different skill sets and different credentialing bodies, and most hiring managers are left piecing together a picture role by role.

This guide lays out what the labor market actually looks like for commercial irrigation right now, the ten roles contractors recruit for most, and a practical framework for hiring that doesn't rely on a resume simply saying "certified."

Across the tracked keyword set, total combined monthly search volume for commercial irrigation hiring- and career-related terms runs around **1,170 a month** (SEMrush Keyword Magic Tool) — a small market, but not the smallest we've mapped across the ten trades in this rollout.

What makes this trade's search data different from some other niche trades: the hiring-intent cluster — "irrigation technician jobs," "irrigation technician job description," "irrigation technician jobs near me" — is actually the *largest* of the three tracked clusters at roughly 480 combined monthly searches, ahead of the certification/license cluster (~350/mo) and the salary-research cluster (~320/mo). In markets where curiosity about pay dominates, that usually signals candidates browsing. Here, hiring intent leading the data points to something else: real, active hiring pressure, plausibly tied to seasonal turnover as crews staff up and down around the irrigation season.

WHY THE BLS DOESN'T TRACK THIS TRADE

The work splits across two very different classifications — and neither one is a perfect fit.

There is no dedicated Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational code for "irrigation technician." Most installation, service, and controller work on commercial systems is folded into **Grounds Maintenance Workers (SOC 37-3011)**. Backflow prevention and main-line work on larger commercial systems, however, crosses into licensed plumbing scope in most states and sits closer to **Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters (SOC 47-2152)**.

We're explicit about which classification applies to which role throughout this guide, rather than picking one and forcing every position into it. That distinction matters for pay, too — it's roughly the difference between a \$39,150 median and a \$63,800 median (more on that in the companion Salary Guide).

Four Irrigation Association credentials, plus one plumbing-side credential — and none of them are interchangeable.

Because there's no single government-tracked credential for this trade, the real professional standards come from the Irrigation Association and, for backflow work, from plumbing licensing bodies:

- **Certified Irrigation Technician (CIT)** — the entry-level credential. Requires a minimum of six months or 1,000 hours of irrigation-related field experience, then a three-hour, 100-question exam covering basic irrigation principles, electrical fundamentals, and hydraulics.
- **Certified Irrigation Contractor (CIC)** — a tier above CIT. Requires at least three years of field experience (or two years plus one year of education); the exam covers design, installation, scheduling, water management, maintenance and repair, codes, and general business management.
- **Certified Irrigation Designer (CID)** — the working credential behind the Irrigation System Designer role, which BLS does not track as a separate occupation.
- **Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor (CLIA)** — the credential EPA WaterSense recognizes as the professional standard for irrigation auditing. Requires passing a 125-question exam (70% to pass) on audit procedures, scheduling, soil-plant relationships, and equipment, plus submitting an independently completed field audit that another certified auditor verifies.

Backflow prevention runs on a separate track entirely: most states require testers to hold an **ASSE 5110** credential — a 40-hour training course, a 100-question exam, and a hands-on practical test on the assemblies they'll be certifying — generally tied to plumbing licensure rather than a landscape or irrigation certification. Both CIT and CIC require ongoing continuing-education units to stay current, which is worth verifying isn't lapsed before you treat a resume line as current.

The practical problem for hiring managers: a resume that says "certified irrigation technician" doesn't tell you which of these five credentials someone actually holds, whether it's current, or whether it's even the right one for the role you're filling.

THE 10 ROLES

The positions commercial irrigation contractors recruit for most.

There is no dedicated BLS code for the trade itself, so several of these map to the nearest real occupational category — we say explicitly which one, and why, rather than guessing. A full wage breakdown by role is in the companion Salary Guide.

ROLE	NEAREST CLASSIFICATION / CREDENTIAL
Irrigation Technician / Installer	BLS 37-3011, Grounds Maintenance Workers
Certified Irrigation Technician (CIT)	BLS 37-3011; CIT is an Irrigation Association credential, not a separate BLS occupation
Irrigation System Designer	BLS 17-1012, Landscape Architects (nearest tracked); working credential is CID
Backflow Prevention Specialist	BLS 47-2152, Plumbers/Pipefitters/Steamfitters; runs on ASSE 5110
Irrigation Service / Repair Technician	BLS 37-3011, Grounds Maintenance Workers
Irrigation Foreman / Crew Lead	BLS 37-1012, First-Line Supervisors of Landscaping, Lawn Service, and Groundskeeping Workers
Irrigation Project Manager	BLS 11-9021, Construction Managers
Irrigation Estimator	BLS 13-1051, Cost Estimators
Smart / Controller Systems Technician	BLS 37-3011 (nearest tracked); no dedicated code for irrigation-automation specialists
Landscape Water Management Auditor	BLS 37-3011 (nearest tracked); working credential is CLIA, EPA WaterSense-recognized

Screen for the right credential before you screen for anything else.

- **Ask which credential, specifically.** "Certified irrigation technician" could mean CIT, CIC, or nothing verifiable at all — get the exact credential name before the interview, not during it.
- **Match the credential to the actual role.** A CIT-holding installer is not automatically qualified to design a system (that's CID) or audit one (that's CLIA) — different credentials verify different work.
- **Verify backflow credentials separately.** ASSE 5110 status is tied to plumbing licensure in most states — confirm it directly rather than taking a resume line at face value.
- **Build a pipeline before the season turns.** With real seasonal turnover pressure and few standing pipelines built for this trade, waiting until a seat opens puts you behind contractors who already have a warm bench.

A full interview framework — including specific questions by role — is in the companion Interview Guide.

WHY FLAT-RATE

Contingency fees are a tax on urgency. A retainer is a tax on nothing.

Most staffing agencies work on contingency — a percentage fee, often 20-25% of first-year salary, paid only when a hire lands. That model incentivizes speed over fit, and gives the agency no reason to build a durable pipeline for a trade this specialized.

My Trade Talent works on a flat monthly retainer instead:

- We're incentivized to build a standing, credential-verified pipeline — not just fill one seat and move on.
- Your cost doesn't spike heading into irrigation season and doesn't disappear in the off-season — it's predictable.
- We stay accountable for fit over time, not just for a signed offer letter.

If open irrigation seats are costing you production capacity every week they sit empty, a standing pipeline is worth evaluating against what you're doing today.

An open seat doesn't just sit empty — it moves work onto everyone else.

In an irrigation crew, a vacant seat rarely shows up as a clean, isolated loss. It shows up as a foreman pulled off supervision to run a route, as backflow testing that slips past its window, or as a bid you don't submit because you can't staff the scope with confidence. None of that is captured by "one open req" on a whiteboard.

Because the tracked search data shows hiring intent actually leading salary curiosity in this trade, the pressure to fill seats appears to be real and active rather than seasonal noise — which means treating every vacancy as a one-off emergency puts you behind contractors who are staffing continuously instead.

Use our free **Cost of Vacancy Calculator** at mytradetalent.com/cost-of-vacancy to model what a specific open seat is costing your shop in overtime, coverage, and lost margin — by role and days vacant.

In a scarce-credential trade, the hiring conversation runs both directions.

Candidates who actually hold CIT, CIC, CID, or CLIA credentials have options in a market this specialized. Contractors who win the best candidates on their shortlist tend to be specific and honest about a handful of things candidates in this trade consistently ask about:

- **System mix.** Candidates want to know whether they'll be working drip, rotor, spray, or smart-controller systems — and whether the shop invests in keeping equipment current.
- **Seasonal schedule and off-season work.** Because this trade has real seasonal turnover, a specific answer about what off-season work looks like (winterization, spring startup, retrofit work) lands better than a vague promise of "year-round work."
- **A real path from CIT toward CIC, CID, or CLIA.** Contractors who can describe that path specifically — not vaguely — retain longer.
- **Support for backflow certification.** Covering or reimbursing ASSE 5110 training signals the shop takes the licensed side of the work seriously.

None of this replaces competitive pay. But at parity, the shop that answers these questions specifically wins the candidate the vaguer competitor loses.

RETENTION

The certification path that gets someone hired is also what keeps them.

Because CIT, CIC, CID, and CLIA credentials are individually held, portable, and career-defining, they double as a retention lever most contractors underuse. A technician who sees a concrete, funded path from CIT toward CIC or CID — design work, better hours, a path off the truck — has a real reason to stay rather than shop their resume every time a competitor posts a higher hourly rate.

Scheduling predictability matters just as much in a trade with real seasonal swings. Crews that know their off-season plan two months out — not left wondering whether there's work between seasons — report meaningfully less turnover than crews managed job-to-job with no visibility.

BUILDING THE PIPELINE

What "credential-verified pipeline" actually means, operationally.

A standing pipeline isn't a bigger applicant pool — it's a smaller, pre-vetted one, maintained continuously instead of assembled under deadline. In practice, that means:

- Credentials are confirmed against the specific certification claimed — CIT, CIC, CID, CLIA, or ASSE 5110 — before a candidate ever reaches your desk, not after an offer is extended.
- Candidates are tagged by actual system experience (drip, rotor, spray, smart-controller) and licensed scope (backflow-qualified or not), rather than self-reported skill level.
- The pipeline stays warm between openings, so a seat filling today doesn't leave you starting from zero heading into the next irrigation season.

Four questions worth asking any recruiter before you sign with them.

- **"How do you verify an irrigation certification?"** If the answer doesn't distinguish between CIT, CIC, CID, and CLIA, the candidates you're seeing haven't been verified against the right standard — just represented.
- **"What happens to the pipeline in the off-season?"** Contingency recruiters have no incentive to maintain one between placements. Ask what stays warm.
- **"How do you verify backflow credentials?"** ASSE 5110 status is tied to plumbing licensure in most states — a recruiter who doesn't check this separately from irrigation certifications is missing a real compliance gap.
- **"Do you specialize in this trade, or is irrigation one of a dozen categories you cover?"** Specificity in the answer usually tracks with specificity in the candidates.

FINAL WORD

A small market doesn't mean a low-stakes hire.

Commercial irrigation is a small labor market by search volume, but the tracked data shows real, active hiring pressure — not idle curiosity about pay. Contractors who build a credential-verified pipeline now, ahead of the season rather than reactively during it, will spend less time and money on this problem than the ones piecing together a hire req by req.

A flat-rate recruiting partner built for commercial trades.

My Trade Talent recruits for commercial trades contractors nationally on a flat monthly retainer — no per-hire contingency fee, no incentive to rush a placement that doesn't fit. We maintain live, credential-verified candidate pipelines across commercial irrigation and nine other commercial trades verticals.

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The pipeline runs through landscaping crews and Irrigation Association coursework, not four-year degrees.

Irrigation talent overwhelmingly enters through the broader landscaping and grounds-maintenance trade, then specializes — a Grounds Maintenance Worker who picks up irrigation-specific skills on the job, then pursues CIT and eventually CIC through Irrigation Association coursework and exams. Backflow specialists typically come from the plumbing side, adding ASSE 5110 to an existing licensed trade background rather than starting from an irrigation base.

That matters for sourcing: this candidate pool doesn't concentrate in one job-board category. Relationships with landscaping contractors, plumbing apprenticeship programs, and the Irrigation Association's own training network consistently surface stronger candidates than a generic posting.

Irrigation hiring pressure is tied to the season — which is a scheduling problem, not a demand problem.

Commercial irrigation work concentrates around the installation, startup, service, and winterization cycle of the irrigation season, which varies by climate but creates a predictable rhythm of staffing-up and staffing-down that few contractors plan a hiring calendar around. The tracked search data's hiring-intent cluster leading the certification and salary clusters is consistent with that pattern: contractors searching for candidates in real time around seasonal ramp-up, rather than a steady year-round trickle.

A standing pipeline built ahead of the season — rather than a posting written the week crews need to double in size — is the practical answer to a demand pattern that repeats every year rather than a one-time gap to fill.



Every hire from zero is a *tax* on your team.

My Trade Talent maintains a live, credential-verified pipeline of trades talent on a flat monthly retainer — so open seats fill with qualified people, not guesses.

Schedule a Discovery Call

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