

Septic Tank Prosecutions Stir Anger

Septic Tank Prosecutions in Alabama Stir Anger in One of Nation's Poorest Counties

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HAYNEVILLE, Ala. (AP) In a rural Alabama county that is one of the poorest in the nation, hundreds of residents are gathering in old wooden churches off dirt roads to fight a government crackdown on homeowners who don't have septic tanks.

Called by friends, neighbors, relatives and radio stations, angry residents are traveling weekly to share their stories and join in a movement to find a solution to the problem that doesn't involve putting people in jail.

"These people are being criminalized because they're poor," said Bob Mants, a leader in the effort to get help to Lowndes County and a veteran of the voting rights demonstrations of 1965. "We are prepared to fill up the jails in Lowndes County. I hope it doesn't come to that."

The center of the fight is Lowndes County, where many residents improperly run their raw sewage through pipes into fields or dump it in the woods.

Since most of the rural county doesn't have municipal sewer systems, residents must install septic tanks, which are buried underground and contain waste that flows from homes.

But many residents in the impoverished county cannot afford the systems, which often cost between \$6,000 and \$12,000.

Thirty-seven families have been notified by the courts that they need to install waste-removal systems or face jail. So far, more than a dozen people have been arrested and fined. At least 1,200 more lack septic tanks needed for waste disposal and about 1,500 other families have septic systems that are beginning to fail.

Health officials say the crackdown is unfortunate but necessary because of the threat of disease such as diphtheria and cholera from improperly disposed waste.

Another factor in preventing homeowners from installing septic tanks is geography. Lowndes County is in the Black Belt, an Alabama region that was named by educator and ex-slave Booker T. Washington because its dark soil was ideal for growing cotton.

But the rich soil, which grows strong crops, drives up the cost of septic tank systems because it doesn't absorb water very well, said Jim Hairston, a soil conservation professor at Auburn University.

Clay in the ground can make wastewater drainage nearly impossible, so field lines need to be extended to distribute it over a larger amount of land.

Often, tons of dirt must be hauled from more than 30 miles away at a cost of \$3,000 or \$4,000. More money must be spent for a surveyor to evaluate the soil, and if it's unsuitable for an underground septic system, a professional engineer has to design a specialized system, said Pres Allinder, director of environmental services for the state health department.

"These folks are hit with a double whammy," Allinder said. "Not only do they not have a lot of money to start with, but they have the most difficult systems."

"I don't have any running water, I have high power bills, I don't have a septic tank," said Linda Thompson in a brief testimonial at the First Baptist Church of Hayneville. "I have four kids and it's hard."

The potential for disease puts health officials in a bind, said Ron Pugh, the health department officer who oversees sewage and septic tanks. Under state law, health officials must send a legal notice to a residence if there has been a complaint about waste flowing freely on the property.

Pugh said he turns to the district attorney for an arrest warrant if a septic tank hasn't been installed within a few months.

A few families have benefitted from charitable contributions, but not enough to put a dent in the larger predicament.

"If you arrest people, they still won't have septic tanks, and they will still have health problems," said Catherine Flowers, economic development coordinator for Lowndes County and organizer for the movement. "We're not going to allow any families to suffer any hardship or lose any homes under our watch."