



Fast Facts

Metro Atlanta now has 526,000 septic systems in use, and is adding new septic systems at a rate of 12,000 tanks per year. One in four metro locations use septic systems instead of sewers.

There are currently between 90,000 and 100,000 septic systems in use in Gwinnett County alone. If all of these were in one city, it would be one of Georgia's ten largest towns.

One half of new metro Atlanta subdivisions are reliant on septic systems instead of sewers. That reliance jumps to 75% in fast-growing Hall County.

For More Information:
Sierra Club, Georgia Chapter,
Neill Herring

Georgia Water Coalition

Improve Septic System Oversight

What's at Stake?

Septic systems provide excellent service for the safe, environmentally sound disposal of wastewater over great expanses of the state of Georgia. Numerous places in our large state are never going to be reached by sewer lines since sewers need relatively dense populations, and Georgia is particularly lucky in its expanse of open space. However, Georgia has a problem with septic systems in areas of relatively high population density, areas where sewers would be cost-effective.

Gwinnett County, for example, has almost 100,000 septic systems, an immense number for any county and particularly for a place with a population now approaching one million people. Some of these septic tanks are old. They date to the era when Gwinnett was still largely rural before the boom years of the last four decades. But many of these installations are not that old. They were chosen by homebuilders because they were cheaper than providing sewer service.

Challenges

What is wrong with reliance on septic systems in counties with dense populations? The problem lies in the regulation of waste water under Georgia law. Because septic systems were designed for predominantly rural installation, while the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) law, the Clean Water Act, deals with what are called "point discharges" into waterways. Septic systems do not directly discharge into waters, but slowly discharge into the soils of their drainfields.

Wastewater that is discharged by sewer systems is regulated by the Environmental Protection Division, as part of Georgia's agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the provisions of the Clean Water Act. Waste water from septic systems is regulated by each county's Board of Public Health by an officer called the Environmental Health Inspector. This same official has other duties, such as making sure that restaurants are sanitary. In areas with large numbers of septic systems, Board of Health regulation is inadequate to make sure that existing systems are working properly and that new systems meet appropriate siting and soil suitability standards.

There is currently a debate among Georgia hydrologists as to the role of septic systems and stream flow levels. It is plain that sewers are able to return treated waste water to streams more quickly and in greater quantities than septic systems. Some scientists have argued that septic systems help augment or supplement the "base flow" of streams. These questions need a better point of resolution than that provided by County Boards of Public Health, which have other serious duties apart from hydrological investigations.

Next Steps

Charging responsibility for regulation of septic systems in counties with populations exceeding 100,000 people to Georgia EPD, instead of an overburdened County Board of Health official is a sensible solution to problems presented by septic density in Georgia. EPD already provides regulation for large volumes of wastewater, so with proper support, it should not be difficult for them to regulate these additional large sources.