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This is a guest commentary from Eric Casey, executive director of the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association

Raise Awareness and Funds to Promote the Use of Onsite Systems

By Eric Casey

A disorganized industry, legislative and regulatory ignorance/inertia, public misconceptions, and a bias against the onsite/decentralized wastewater industry from competing interests have led to a situation where:

- Negative media coverage about onsite systems and solutions frequently goes unchallenged, regardless of accuracy.
- The industry's interests are often steamrolled by better-funded and organized interest groups when securing more favorable regulation and support.
- Our industry is almost always slighted in the funding necessary to address problems such as identifying and repairing failing systems, supporting and spreading the transfer of technologies, encouraging proper maintenance and more cost-effective ways to dispose of or reuse solid waste, and expanding

the use of onsite systems in rural, suburban, and even urban environments as a more economical and environmentally sound alternative to municipal sewers.

The most egregious example of the industry's lack of access to funding is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF). In 2008, according to the EPA's website, the total amount of assistance provided by the fund through loans, grants and other means was slightly more than \$5.5 billion. The amount of assistance provided for onsite systems was \$9.1 million. That is less than 0.2 percent of available funding for 25 to 30 percent of the population using onsite systems.

SEWER PROJECTS SCORE

Virtually all of the remaining funding goes to municipal sewer projects. The EPA claims that 4 percent of SRF assistance goes to onsite projects, but the agency has not made public any data supporting that claim. Further, abundant anecdotal evidence suggests that much of the funding labeled as onsite/decentralized is spent for other purposes.

If our industry received funding commensurate with the number of homes and businesses it serves, its annual share would be \$1 to \$1.5 billion. With that amount, we could address problems associated with public image and education, practitioner training, remediation of systems, technology transfer, disposition/reuse of biosolids, and expansion of onsite systems. It also would help stabilize companies facing financial challenges and possibly increase employment.

We have a terrific story to tell. When properly installed and maintained, onsite systems are an ecologically sound, safe, and energy-efficient solution. They are frequently a more cost-effective alternative to sewers. They safely recharge dwindling aquifers. With disinfection, effluent is safe for reuse to flush toilets, wash cars and irrigate landscapes. Stabilized biosolids are an excellent and safe agricultural fertilizer. Onsite technologies have a key role in movement toward integrated watershed management. Proper funding would enable us to share these important stories with the public, the regulatory community and the environmental community.

GAINING MORE SUPPORT

The onsite community must recognize the need to work together to enlarge the pie for everyone. Success will not occur without a unified effort. While there are many possible ways to address the issue, the most direct route is to secure additional funding from federal sources such as the SRF and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Water Program. That funding would be used to:

1. Repair failing onsite systems.
2. Prevent future system malfunctions through proper maintenance and service.
3. Better educate the public and other stakeholders about the economic, ecological, and societal benefits of onsite systems.



Tom & Eileen:

Thank you for your tireless efforts in bringing NAWT to a whole new level! We wish you much success with your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Ralph & Rosalie Macchio

4. Empower and encourage states to develop the capacity to receive and properly manage federal funding for onsite projects.

5. Develop professional standards to help eliminate substandard, shoddy, dishonest, and fraudulent activities.

6. Encourage faster and more consistent transfer of new technologies from the research stage to implementation in the field.

ACTION PLAN

1. Establish an Onsite Wastewater Coalition that includes the National Association of Wastewater Transporters, National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, related organizations, state affiliates, individual members, and manufacturers.

2. Secure funding from coalition members to develop a lobbying presence in Washington to change the disbursement of SRF monies.

3. Secure commitments from other coalition partners for support in areas such as research, public and media relations, grassroots advocacy and related activities.

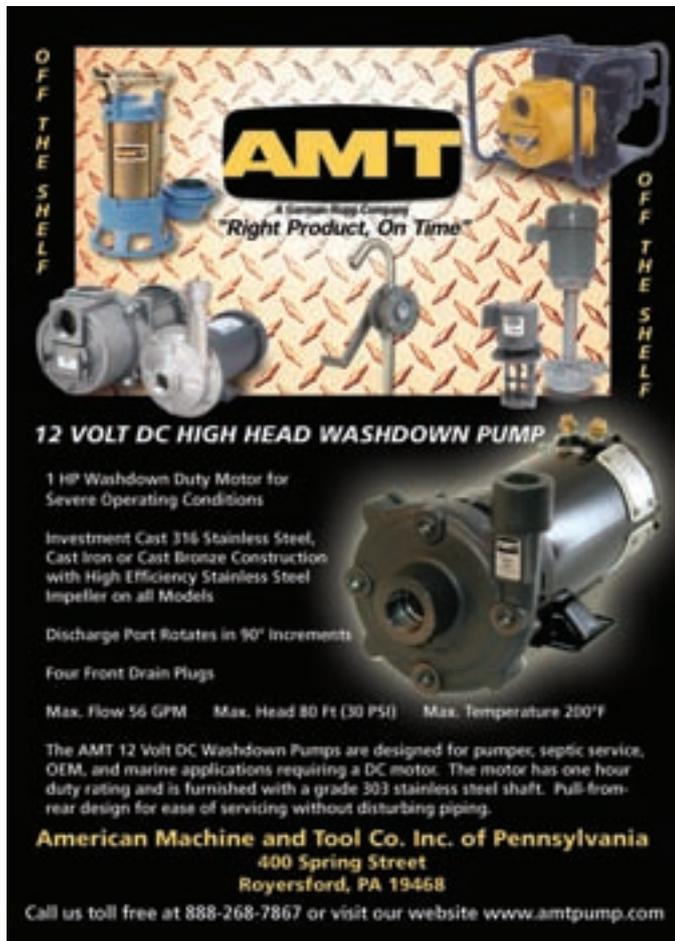
4. Engage a Washington lobbying firm to develop the most effective strategies for carrying the coalition's message to the EPA and Congress, and to work on other issues as they arise.

5. Develop a working group of coalition members to define specific goals of the lobbying effort and to report on strategic approaches suggested by the lobbying firm.

IN CONCLUSION

When Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, he replied, "That's where the money is." Many of our industry problems are unlikely to be addressed unless we go where the money is. The effort is not aimed at increasing federal spending; rather, it is intended to ensure that our industry secures funding commensurate with the role it plays in protecting the public's health and America's clean water.

Reach Eric Casey by phone at 703/535-5265 or by email at wecasey@nowra.org. ■



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