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# Installing Time Bombs

**Sanitary conditions in poorer areas of the country should serve as reminders to installers to build quality and to demand the same of everyone in the profession**

By **Ted J. Rulseh**

**A**n article in this month's *Onsite Installer* tells us of deplorable sanitary conditions in Southern Appalachia caused by failed or nonexistent septic systems.

This came as no surprise to me, since a friend who took part in a Habitat for Humanity trip recently told of some conditions he observed in that general part of the country. Suffice it to say: Most of us don't know the half of it.

Another story in this issue tells about how quality installers in Missouri struggle to compete against the corner-cutters who just throw in the cheapest systems they can build — never mind long-term performance. Of course, this problem is by no means unique to Missouri.

## What's wrong here?

As I worked with these stories, a light bulb came on. Why do we allow this to happen? The sanitary conditions in poorer areas pose a complex economic problem, perhaps best addressed in Congress or in statehouses.

But as for installers putting in substandard systems for people who are building nice homes and can well afford quality wastewater treatment — that's a matter for the industry itself to address.

We get upset about a used-car salesman who peddles a car with a broken tie-rod, a real estate broker who sells an elderly person a parcel

of swamp land in Florida, a jeweler who pushes fake diamonds, or a doctor who does unnecessary surgery.

But we seem to simply shrug when it comes to people installing wastewater treatment systems that do the bare minimum, or less. They are just such clever little scamps, almost heroic in a way, running around with an old backhoe, doing it cheap, saving money for the little guy.

But since when is it all right to perform a service that directly affects

rather put money for a house into a master bedroom suite or a billiard room than pay for an onsite system. After all, if the toilet flushes and the water goes away, the system must be working, right?

Regardless, when these systems fail the owner is harmed, and so is the environment. So why do we let it go on?

Then there is the matter of simple fairness. Why should an installer who does it right, acquires certifications, attends trade shows,

Installer of Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems national credential.

Programs like these set the ceiling — certifications provide a great way for the best installers to differentiate themselves. But besides a ceiling, there needs to be a floor. Take the restaurant business. Establishments range all the way from diner food to five-star cuisine — but certain minimums apply to everyone.

For one thing, you don't run a restaurant of any kind unless your kitchen is inspected for sanitary equipment and practices. And you don't serve food that doesn't come from a legitimate purveyor. At least you don't if you want to comply with the law and be sure of hanging on to your license.

Where's the floor in the onsite business? In some states and localities, it hardly exists. That has to change. Can you come up with a good reason why any person, anywhere, should install onsite systems without having to document some basic but meaningful level of competence and responsibility?

If not, then perhaps it's time to get serious — really serious — about putting a floor under the onsite business. To shrink from doing so is to do injustice to home buyers, quality installers, and the nation's water resources. ■

## Since when is it all right to perform a service that directly affects the public health without being held to extremely high standards?

the public health without being held to extremely high standards?

### Why let it go?

Maybe we refrain from making it an issue because the damage these people cause is subtle and develops over time. When a car dealer sells a vehicle with bad brakes, it could end up wrapped around a tree the next day. When someone installs a septic system with a bad drainfield, it might chug along for a few years before sewage surfaces and the owner has to repair or replace it.

Maybe demand for cheap work persists because people would

takes courses and supports industry associations get undercut on price by someone who does none of those things?

### Ceiling and floor

The problem is more acute in some states than in others. Some have stringent licensing, training, certification and continuing education requirements. Others, well ...

Industry groups are doing a great job of promoting excellence through things like special training and certification programs. Perhaps the most ambitious effort in this direction is the National Environmental Health Association Certified