

Alabama: Deteriorating rural sewer and septic systems

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In July, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program announced that it was making \$4 billion in low-interest loans available to many of Alabama's rural municipalities, communities and recognized tribal entities for the "the construction, upgrade, or expansion of clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage systems, solid waste disposal infrastructure, and storm water drainage in rural areas."

Alabama's sewage disposal system failures became international news in December, when United Nations Rapporteur Phil Alston toured the state and discovered that many communities were literally awash in untreated sewage. Poorly managed municipal waste management systems and inadequate household septic systems have led to widespread hookworm infections in the state's rural Black Belt communities. "I think it's very uncommon in the First World," Alston told reporters.

Impermeable clay and chalk lie beneath the rich, black loam for which the region is named. This makes conventional septic systems, which cost about \$2,000 to install, almost useless. Septic systems designed to account for the lack of natural percolation, or deep drainage, cost \$6,000 to \$12,000, which is out of reach for the Black Belt's most impoverished residents. Many turn to what environmental scientists call "straight-piping," discharging household sewage through a pipe into the outdoors.

Even where municipal sewer systems exist, overflows and contamination can occur. Two Black Belt municipalities, Hayneville in Lowndes County and Uniontown in Perry County, have been ordered by the Alabama Department of Environmental Protection (ADEM) to resolve long-standing problems with their municipal sewer systems. Both systems rely to some

extent or another upon poorly dammed collection lagoons.

Hayneville, the seat of Lowndes County, has a population of 874. Its median income is only \$20,967. Hayneville's sewage system fails with even light rains, sending raw sewage backing up into toilets and bathtubs of sewer customers. Its collection lagoon overflows frequently, flooding the property of non-sewer residents in the unincorporated areas adjacent to the town. The city lacks the funds to remedy these issues. It is unknown whether they will apply for or qualify for the USDA loans.

Uniontown, a small town in Perry County, demonstrates why the USDA loans are not enough. Its collapsing sewage collection and treatment system continues to fail, despite a USDA loan of nearly \$5 million in loans and grants issued in 2012. In a recent court filing, ADEM representatives stated: "Overflows ... have been chronic issues and appear to be increasing in number, volume and frequency. ... The increasingly deteriorating conditions pose an increased threat to the health and welfare to the citizens of Uniontown and the environment."

The city's partially treated sewage is regularly discharged into two separate creeks, in violation of the Clean Water Act. The city regularly fails to notify residents after sewer spills. ADEM, however, has "exhausted its legally available enforcement options against Uniontown" and "the matter is now in the hands of the courts," according to a status update from January.

The status update also specified that Uniontown residents "pay among the highest sewer fees in the area and, due to their income levels, are unlikely to be able to withstand increased fees to provide needed funding."

Sentell Engineering, the firm responsible for

Uniontown's sewer upgrades, maintains that they have done the best they could with the money from the USDA. They claim the fact that the sewage being discharged into the creeks and onto public and private property is now partially treated, as opposed to completely untreated, represents progress.

Uniontown's system was engineered to handle around 500,000 gallons a day. An inch of rainfall, though, can send 2 million gallons per day into the treatment lagoon, where it cannot adequately be treated. In addition, the sprayfield, which is supposed to spray the treated sewage from the lagoon onto the soil to evaporate and percolate into the water table, is built on impermeable clay soil, where the water cannot percolate or evaporate quickly. It therefore becomes less of a sprayfield and more of a pond for the partially treated sewage.

Sentell has admitted that beaver dams are keeping the partially treated water from the sprayfield from overflowing. The USDA denied the town's most recent application for more loans.

Democratic State Representative Terri Sewell, whose district includes Hayneville and Uniontown, and US Senator Doug Jones have blamed the poor environmental controls in the Black Belt on "environmental racism." While racism most certainly has played a despicable role in the destruction of Black Belt infrastructure, this claim is absurdly reductive. While the sanitation crisis in the Black Belt is pronounced and unjust, it is not dissimilar to similar issues facing other rural communities throughout the state.

An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study conducted in Bibb County, which sits adjacent to the Black Belt, revealed that the majority of households rely on septic systems for sewage disposal. Of these, 35 percent have failing septic systems, and 15 percent straight-pipe household sewage. As a result, the EPA estimates that more than 60,000 gallons of raw sewage is discharged in Bibb County per day. As a result, more than 1 billion enteric viruses, more than 1 billion giardia cysts and more than 300 million cryptosporidium oocysts enter Bibb County's water table daily. Most of Bibb County is eligible for the USDA's water and sewer loans.

Municipal sewers are scarce in Sand Mountain, a poor, predominantly white region in northeast

Alabama. Like the Black Belt, it is underlain by clay. Most of Sand Mountain is eligible for the USDA's loans. Municipal water supplies in the area are subject to frequent cryptosporidium and giardia contamination. Many residents complain of sewage standing in their yards and pastures after hard rains, despite having sanctioned septic systems.

Alabama's sewer woes demonstrate in a particularly acute and poetic way the dangers posed by failing infrastructure, political bad faith and general economic deterioration throughout the nation. In 2015, 400,000 US households reported septic system breakdowns; 1.4 million reported sewage connection problems.

The Trump administration has consistently worked to undermine environmental protections and EPA funding. Democrats such as Jones work to throw scant crumbs at these monumental issues while dividing the state's workers along racial lines. Meanwhile, Jones and his party continue to divert funding away from social programs into the Pentagon and Wall Street.

Alabama's workers are well acquainted with how these issues work themselves out. Uniontown residents contend with contaminated water despite having received USDA loans. Jefferson County's workers continue to pay outrageous sewer rates while holding their noses on rainy days, and JPMorgan, which backed most of the financiers of the County Commission's corrupt deals and spun the nation's largest bankruptcy out of a sewage rehabilitation scheme, enjoys soaring stocks.



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