

# Local Services in Oklahoma



# Local Services

The DEQ, through its Environmental Complaints and Local Services Division, provides a cadre of 70 multi-media environmental specialists based in 29 offices across the state. These environmental specialists, trained in air quality, water quality and land protection issues,

are in position to provide a local approach to environmental regulation. This means that they can readily inspect the pollution control facilities in their communities, can provide same day service for on-site sewage disposal system inspections and can provide rapid response to

citizen complaints of environmental pollution.

The most important role of the locally based environmental specialists is response to environmental complaints. Approximately 6,000 complaints each year are reported to the DEQ. With their comprehen-

sive skills, the local environmental specialists are able to provide initial response and investigation for almost all of these complaints. Either through local ES action alone or through involvement of Agency specialists when necessary, the DEQ routinely resolves all complaints within 90 days of receipt. 🌱

## DEQ Protects Oklahoma's Beachgoers



*Todd Caves and Chance Nichols fly a kite on the swim beach at Wes Watkins Lake. Swimming is Skyler Nichols, Azlyn Webber and Jarrod Want.*

The DEQ has the authority and responsibility to protect beachgoers with respect to water quality issues. Of greatest concern is an amoebic organism known to cause Primary Amoebic Meningoencephalitis (PAM). The organism can thrive in warm slow moving fecal contaminated water and can infect swimmers by entering the body through the mouth and nasal passages. Although rare, PAM can be fatal to children. DEQ is attempting to protect its citizens by identifying susceptible beaches and issuing swimming advisories to beach operators when conditions are right for the presence of the organism.

As a first step, local environmental specialists are surveying all of the known beaches and designated swimming areas in the state. The survey is designed to identify factors that could negatively affect the water quality such as shielding from wind action, proximity of wild or domestic animals and typical bathing populations. The most susceptible beaches as identified by the surveys will be monitored throughout the warm summer months. When weather and water quality conditions are right to support amoebic organisms, warnings will be issued for susceptible beaches. 🌱

# ECLS Gets Innovative in Ice Storm Clean Up



*The ice coated splintered utility poles were eventually re-used by farmers in fences and pole barns instead of sending them to a DEQ permitted landfill.*

Last winter a destructive ice storm hit western Oklahoma. The thick coating of ice snapped trees, pulled down power lines and broke tens of thousands of utility poles. DEQ response included checking water and sewer services, locating emergency generators to restore water service and helping communities solve the massive debris disposal issue.

The toughest problem with this storm was deter-

mining what to do with all of the utility poles. Because they are chemically treated, utility poles cannot be safely burned or buried at emergency disposal sites like other storm debris. The only legal and environmentally sound option would be disposal at a DEQ permitted landfill. Even this option was not that attractive due to the sheer numbers of poles and limited landfill space. DEQ in conjunction with the Federal

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the utility companies sought a better solution.

As clean up began, it became evident that there was a demand for the poles. Farmers and ranchers wanted the poles for fence posts and pole barns. Beneficial reuse is always preferable to disposable so DEQ promoted this option to FEMA and the utilities. The utilities agreed to stockpile the poles

and make them available to anyone who wanted them. DEQ developed a press release outlining acceptable (fence posts, pole barns and landscape timbers) and unacceptable (firewood, playground equipment and home construction) uses for the poles. This policy provided both an environmentally sound and economically feasible solution to what originally appeared to be an enormous disposal problem. 🌱

# Local Environmental Specialist Assists in Cordell Tornado

When disaster strikes, the DEQ Local Environmental Specialist is often first on the scene, arriving about the same time as rescue workers. This was the case when a tornado struck the town of Cordell in Washita County last October. DEQ employee, Beth Ledbetter, lives in nearby Burns Flat and responded immediately after the tornado. Even while search and rescue efforts were still underway, Beth was busy checking lift stations and water supplies and was lining up generators to keep essential sewer and water services working. She also convinced the town to institute an immediate precautionary boil order in case the water supply had been contaminated.

After the initial emergencies were under control, she worked with town officials to locate and permit emergency disposal sites for the storm debris. Within 24 hours of the tornado, the town had a disposal site permitted and ready to accept waste.



*Above is a sample of the types of destruction from the Cordell tornado.*

Knowing the area and the town officials is invaluable in responding to emergencies. Beth, like most of the local environmental specialists across the state, knew what services were affected and who to talk to in order to get swift action to restore services and initiate clean up. Beth's work was not overlooked by the town. Following the cleanup, the mayor of Cordell presented Beth with a Mayor's Order of Merit for her services and assistance. 🌿



*Beth Ledbetter poses with the "Mayor's Order Of Merit" plaque.*

# Failing Septic Systems Call for Varied Approach to Compliance

Due to either poor design, misuse or damage, several thousand septic systems in the state fail each year. In most cases, this means that improperly treated wastewater is surfacing from lateral lines and discharging to the surface of the ground or to the waters of the state. Local DEQ environmental specialists identify failing systems as part of our complaints response program and initiate action to get the problem corrected.

When a complaint of surfacing sewage is received, the local environmental specialist investigates to confirm the violation. If confirmed, the environmental specialist assists in finding a solution and starts enforcement by issuing a warning letter to the responsible party. In the vast majority of cases, the system is repaired as requested in the warning letter. In some cases the responsible party is non-cooperative. When this happens, DEQ is prepared to



*Pictured are typical findings during surfacing sewage investigation.*

pursue compliance through enforcement action. This begins with either a Notice of Violation or Voluntary Consent Order and continues with fines for noncompliance and when necessary, referral to the local District Attorney.

In a few instances each year, no amount of enforcement will bring about compliance since the responsible party simply does not have the financial means to repair or replace his failing system. For these indigent violators, the DEQ uses fine money it has collected to fix the failing system. During this past year, the DEQ spent \$56,000 to

correct failing systems for 18 indigent citizens.

Through this multi-faceted approach, the DEQ has

obtained compliance for nearly every failing septic system that has been brought to our attention. 🌍



# Local Environmental Specialists Prepare for Soil Profiles

During the past two years, DEQ has been working toward the implementation of soil profile descriptions to design on-site sewage disposal systems. This involved passing legislation, developing sizing criteria, developing rules for using soil profiles and developing rules to certify and regulate people performing profiles. The last two steps to complete implementation of soil profile descriptions are:

1. Training our local environmental specialists in the use of soil profiles and
2. Training and certifying members of the private sector.



DEQ staff practicing soil texturing techniques.

During much of the rule development, DEQ borrowed expertise from Oklahoma State University soil scientists. Now, due to the need for intensive and ongoing training, both for our staff and the private sector, DEQ has hired a full time soil scientist. The soil scientist has

trained and tested our staff and provides field expertise and support when confusing soils are encountered. Currently, the soil scientist is developing the curriculum for training the private sector.

The Agency has already seen the benefits of using soil profiles. Seasonal ground

water, undetectable by a percolation test, can be readily identified using a soil profile. By considering this information when designing systems, we are able to keep subsurface lines out of the groundwater and thus avoid seasonal failure. 🌱

Above: Pit used for soil profiles.

# Certification Now Mandatory for On-site Sewage Disposal System Installers

For the last seven years, DEQ has administered a voluntary certification program for installers of on-site sewage disposal systems. Installers who opted for certification could perform the final construction inspection on systems they installed. Based on a statute that was passed during the 2001 legislative session, mandatory certification for on-site sewage disposal system installers became effective July 1, 2002. This means that anyone who installs at least ten individual sewage disposal systems a year must be certified by the DEQ. Certification requirements include eight to 16 hours of DEQ provided training and passing an examination administered by DEQ.

With the deadline of July 1, 2002 for certification, there was a significant increase in the demand for certification classes during the last half of



*Environmental Complaints Local Services' Matt Pace provides certified installer training.*

the year. From our usual frequency of about one training class per quarter we increased to about six classes in the last half of the year to accommodate all installers needing certification.

As of the end of the fiscal year, there are 248 certified on-site sewage disposal system installers in the state. The benefit for these installers is that local environmental specialist will not have to

travel to every construction site and inspect every system. Providing training and monitoring the certified installers is a much more efficient use of DEQ resources. 🚧

# Environmental Administrative Services in Oklahoma

---

