

PEÑA BLANCA, NEW MEXICO

PROBLEM

Outdated, neglected, or nonexistent wastewater systems posed a public health risk to the 800 citizens of Peña Blanca, New Mexico. Open cesspools and seepage pits emptied into yards and irrigation canals. Surveys revealed that 86% of the individual wastewater systems needed repair or replacement. Residents rejected a proposed centralized sewer system that would have cost \$3.1 million.

SOLUTION

The community opted to repair or replace 133 of the existing 185 treatment systems with the water and sanitation district serving as the operator/manager of the upgraded and new facilities.



OVERVIEW

Local officials worked closely with federal and state agencies to establish the Peña Blanca Water and Sanitation District (WSD) and to develop a

wastewater management program with an emphasis on maintenance. This Management Model 4 program features:

- **Operating permit and maintenance contract requirements**
- **Requirement to pump tanks every two years**
- **Maintenance of system records and reporting requirements**

WATER AND SANITATION DISTRICT SERVES AS THE RME

The Peña Blanca community received an EPA Clean Water Construction Grant of about \$760,000 to repair and replace individual wastewater systems and develop new clustered systems. The WSD was formed in 1990, under the authority of a New Mexico statute, to manage the systems. The WSD adopted an ordinance that provided for the operation, maintenance, and repair of wastewater treatment systems. The district maintains an

inventory of the systems, collects user fees, requires pumping of all tanks at least once every two years, contracts pumping services, maintains all active systems, and coordinates with the City of Albuquerque to accept septage pumped from the tanks.

ORDINANCE SERVES AS MAINTENANCE CONTRACT

The WSD ordinance essentially serves as a maintenance contract and authorizes the district to pump septic tanks every two years. Homeowners retain the option of hiring their own pumpers but must maintain documentation of the service and pay a base fee of \$4 per month. Residents installing new individual wastewater systems must sign an easement allowing for maintenance. All systems must also obtain an operating permit from the New Mexico Environment Department. The WSD is responsible for maintaining pumping records. Systems are inspected in response to citizen complaints.

FUNDING SOURCES

According to septic tank size, WSD charges a monthly service fee, which ranges from \$9 to \$20 per month. The 2008–2009 operating budget was \$27,000.

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RESULTS

The decentralized wastewater option was less than half of the projected cost of central sewage treatment for the 133 homes served by repaired or replaced systems. Sewage surfacing and cesspool discharges throughout the community no longer occur. Post-construction groundwater monitoring found nitrate levels at 1 mg/L or less in the project area, far below the 10 mg/L standard for groundwater used as drinking water.

References and Resources

Falvey C. 2001. Cleanup at Peña Blanca. *Small Flows Quarterly* 2(1):30–32. www.nesc.wvu.edu/pdf/ww/publications/smallflows/magazine/SFQ_WI01.pdf.

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