

Don't Mess with South Louisiana's Camps

By Marilyn Barrett



South Louisiana camp owners love their camps and they don't want anyone messing with them. No one knows how many sports enthusiasts base their hunting and angling in these one- or two-room structures and houseboats, but most people agree that the number of camps is increasing, and their seasonal use—with family, friends, and even business associates—is valued. The increasing use and higher densities of camps are making the old ways of discharging household waste environmentally unacceptable.

PHOTO BY ROBERT RAY

Raw or improperly treated sewage deteriorates water quality, pollutes oyster beds, and degrades fish and aquatic wildlife habitats. Water skiers and swimmers have contracted skin rashes, amoebic dysentery, and parasitic worm diseases from contact with water containing untreated sewage.

“Most people want to keep the water clean, but sometimes it’s very difficult to know how best to do that,” says Sandy Corkern, Sea Grant Extension agent with the LSU Agricultural Center in Lower St. Martin, St. Mary and Iberia parishes.

The traditional sewage disposal system for remote areas (an outhouse) or for rural areas (a toilet and septic tank) may not work for camps in south central Louisiana’s wetlands and marshes or on floating structures. When looking into available alternatives, camp owners sometimes become confused about the best system for a structure because each camp situation is different. Adding to their confusion is the fact that camps and some houseboats come under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH), while “vessels” come under the authority of the United States Coast Guard (USCG). Therefore, that time-honored sewage holding tank—the five-gallon bucket with a tightly fitting lid—may be an acceptable choice in one instance and not in another. Some camps are located on leased land. “Most landowners in Louisiana now require that their leaseholders’ camps meet federal, state and local sanitary regulations,” Corkern says. “With the combination of varied use patterns and environmental conditions, each camp now needs an assessment by DHH to determine the proper treatment system for the site.”

Corkern’s own experience at his camp in a remote wetland area without electrical service demonstrates the challenge. Although the water table at the camp’s location would allow the operation of an individual treatment plant similar to those used in many subdivisions in south Louisiana, other circumstances at the site would not. While most camps need waste treatment systems designed for intermittent use, residential systems are designed for continuous use; and the residential individual treatment plant uses an electric motor to stir the waste slurry and provide oxygen to aid decomposition. To work properly in a camp, Corkern’s individual treatment plant had to be converted from 120 volt a.c. to an approved 12 volt d.c. electrical system.

“I purchased an industrial solar panel to generate power for a battery, converted the pump to 12 volts, and put in a timer for periodic stirring,” Corkern says. “But I invested more to convert my system to 12 volts than some people paid for their camps.”

Other studies are underway to determine if injecting the wastewater down into the

marsh may someday be a possibility for sewage treatment in some parts of the state. If results show probability of success, DHH must test and approve this alternative before it can be used. “It is not sufficient to just install a treatment system,” says David Bankston, an LSU Agricultural Center engineer with Sea Grant Extension. “The system must be operated and maintained correctly.”

Retrofitting houseboats for sewage treatment systems can pose problems due to physical limits and construction of the houseboat. “Vessels” that are used for camps are subject to USCG regulations. Some of these move from bayous to basin once or twice a year as the sport seasons change. They must have and use one of the three classes of Marine Sanitation Devices (MSDs). The law clearly prohibits the release of untreated sewage into Louisiana’s waters.

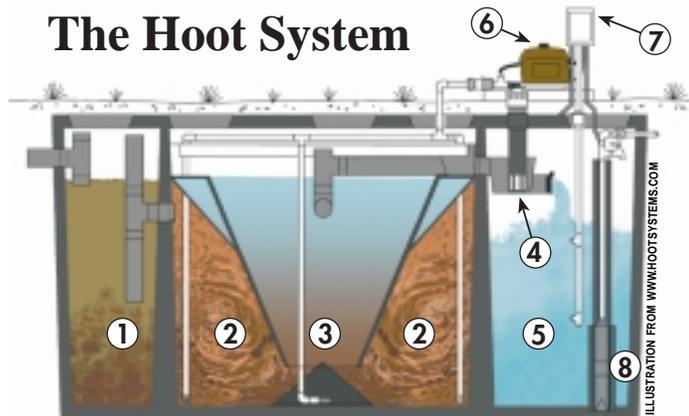
What kind of waste disposal system is the right one for a particular camp? How must it

be operated and maintained to work correctly? What can a camp owner do to get the longest possible useful life from a sewage treatment system?

Corkern and Bankston, in consultation with DHH, have explored many alternative answers to these and related questions. All this information is being published in a booklet, *Camp and Houseboat Sanitation in Louisiana*. It will be available, without cost, in early spring from Louisiana Sea Grant and the LSU Agricultural Center. Contact the Louisiana Sea Grant Communications Office at 225-578-6448.

“Camps are for passing a good time, not messing with waste treatment,” Corkern says. “But without waste treatment, camp sites can become messed up.” *Camp and Houseboat Sanitation in Louisiana* should help camp owners install and use the right system to let the good times roll. ☞

The Hoot System



1 Pretreatment Tank

2 Aeration Chamber

3 Clarifier Chamber

4 Chlorinator

5 Holding Tank

6 Aerator Pump

7 Control Center

8 Discharge Pump

This is one of several mechanical systems available “off the shelf.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. DAVID BANKSTON

Mechanical waste removal systems for coastal camps, operating by gravity just like a residential septic tank, do not have to be installed below ground level when the camp is elevated.