

'Don't Blame the Pizza Guy'

When onsite systems fail, it's important to look at all the factors, all the decisions, and all the players that may be responsible

By Theo B. Terry III, R.S.

Remember the lawsuit against McDonald's filed a few years ago, in which a man claimed the restaurants' food caused his obesity? Fortunately, common sense prevailed, and the case was eventually dismissed.

Results of a *CNN/Money* online survey showed that 96 percent of nearly 50,000 respondents agreed with the judge that McDonald's was not responsible. But what were those other four percent thinking?

Could blaming the pizza delivery guy be next? Obviously, he's the source of many of our obesity problems, right? He brings all those delicious pizzas right to our door. Oh, but wait. Isn't that just his job? To deliver those pizzas in a timely manner? He's not the one who chooses the large-with-the-works pizza versus the small vegetarian, no cheese. He just delivers. Isn't the person who ordered the pizza *really* responsible for choosing more caloric

intake than he needs?

This analogy carries over to the onsite industry. Who, or what, do we blame when a system fails? I hear this statement all the time: drainfield failure. But did the drainfield really *fail*? Or, just like the pizza delivery guy, did it do its job of delivering the effluent to the soil interface for treatment?

I prefer the term "system failure,"

don't just mean the system in the ground. Most likely, the failure started with the design of the system.

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Dr. Kevin White, professor at the

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because I think it is much more descriptive of what actually happened when an onsite system develops a problem. The system failed. And I

University of South Alabama, has shown through his research that a system design has to take into account all performance factors, and not just hydraulics or delivery of the effluent to the soil.

Hydraulics, use of proper organic loading rates, sufficient gas/air exchange capabilities, treatment and surge volume capacity — plus delivery of effluent to the soil — must be considered. Design must include all aspects of performance, not just the delivery. Or, to put it in words a guy like me can understand, there's more to it than just getting rid of the water, you have to take care of the solids, too.

Back to the drainfield. If the drainfield product gets the effluent out to

the entire length of the drainfield, it did its job. Therefore, any failure actually results from faulty design. The system either was not adequately sized to handle the load, or it suffered homeowner abuse in the form of hydraulic or organic overload.

To overcome these issues, it's necessary to design systems with a more holistic approach, such as one Dr. White proposed, in which the designer takes into account all factors: organic loading rates, surge volume needs, gas exchange needs and climatic conditions — not just the hydraulic loading rates.

Designers, installers, manufacturers and homeowners also need to consider measures to protect onsite systems from abuse. These may include putting quality effluent filters into the tanks that will prevent excessive organics from leaving the tank and entering the drainfield.

For, after all, just as it's not the pizza delivery guy who's making us fat, it's not the drainfield's fault for delivering more organic material and water than the soil can treat.

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