



USDA-CSREES 2007 National Water Quality Conference

Local Communities: Equal Partners or Ignored Bystanders? A Case Study from Rural West Virginia

Location: West Virginia's Lincoln County is one of the poorest areas in a poor state. The Left Fork watershed of the Mud River has even higher indices of poverty. Tributary samplings since the late 1990's have continually shown higher than acceptable levels of total coliforms and e. coli. Based on this research, the Lincoln County Commission was awarded an EPA National Decentralized Wastewater Demonstration grant as part of the 2003 appropriations bill.

Objectives: The grant's purpose is to install a series of alternative home treatment systems in areas which have highest bacterial contamination, then monitor these areas to demonstrate the intervention's effectiveness. Yet just as important has been the attempt to empower the local community so that they are equal decision makers in the total process. In the end, social factors in water management are as paramount as science and technology. Emerging Knowledge Clearly, if there is not buy-in from local people, even the best projects can fall to pieces after the funding has dried up, and the experts leave. What are strategies for increasing long-term project success by encouraging equal partnerships between local citizens and academic and technical experts? This case study looks at the struggle between sharing information and decision making with lay people (many of whom are high school drop outs) and leaving decisions in the hands of experts. It compares academic paradigms with extension models of developing community leadership and decision making skills. The workshop will suggest ways to overcome the typical mismatch between academia and poor people. This case study will present strategies for successful university-community engagement and collaboration, difficulties encountered, results from pre-project community attitude assessments, and perceptions of key academics and community organizers. Participants will be encouraged to share their experiences, ideas, and concerns.

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