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There's help for failing septic systems

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Residents who live in the Chattahoochee River basin and have failing septic tanks can get 50 percent off septic tank repairs through a program of the Rolling Hills Resource Conservation and Development Council.

The septic tank repair program is part of a three-year project to improve water quality in the Upper Middle Chattahoochee River watershed, said Cindy Haygood, Rolling Hills RC&D coordinator. Haygood recently spoke to the Coweta County Board of Commissioners about the council and its various projects.

The council has been working on a water quality improvement project, funded by a grant, for about three years now, said Haygood.

"When we first designed this project, it was a watershed project to address water quality for the poultry industry," regarding poultry waste, Haygood said.

However, "in the last year of our project" they went to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division and "asked for approval to expand the scope for the last year so we could address concerns in other areas," she said.

"We're going to be able to use those dollars to very specifically address septic tank issues in this county, within the watershed," Haygood said. "Our goal is to improve water quality," and failing septic systems have been identified as threats to good water quality.

Septic tank problems are the types of things "none of us budget for," Haygood said. "When they do come along, oftentimes it's something landowners will just choose not to do" because they can be so expensive.

"What we are going to be able to do is pay half" the cost of the repair or replacement, she said.

The first step is for a property owner to go to the Coweta County Environmental Health office and get a septic tank repair permit. That permit information will be sent to Rolling Hills and the council will help the homeowner in the bid process.

There are no income or other restrictions on the grant awards, as long as the failing septic tank is located in the Chattahoochee River watershed. Plus, only qualified contractors can be used.

There is a list of qualified contractors who have gone through a short class with Rolling Hills, Haygood said.

The contractors have seven days to submit a bid, during which time they can visit with the landowner to get an

idea of what the project entails.

After Rolling Hills receives the bid sheet, the council determines the "cost share rate" for the project. Council representatives then meet with the landowner to sign an agreement for the cost share rate and the time frame for completion. The landowner then chooses a contractor from the bid list. Once the work is complete, the landowner sends a copy of the invoice to Rolling Hills. The council will pay its share directly to the contractor, and the landowner pays the difference.

Since the project began in other areas, "it has snowballed," Haygood said. "A lot of landowners have come forward and admitted they have put off a very serious problem until now."

The grant money can pay for septic tank projects ranging from repairs to full replacements, if deemed necessary, as well as risers, and correcting gray water or "straight pipe" waste problems. It can also pay for decommissioning wells that are too close to home foundations or septic systems.

Landowners can also get a \$200 voucher toward a septic tank pump out by attending a short class on septic tank maintenance, Haygood said. The voucher "works just like a coupon with our approved contractors," she said.

Resource Conservation and Development Councils partner with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Other projects include the "no till" initiative, tree planting and farm succession, the Southern Quilt Trail, and the "wheels to work" program which helps provide low-income individuals with vehicles to help them get to work. To be eligible, someone must be financially-unable to obtain a car loan and have a job or a commitment from an employer once transportation is acquired. A community sponsor is also required, and participants make minimal payments on an interest-free loan.

For more information, call 770-749-0444 or visit www.rollinghillsrcd.org

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