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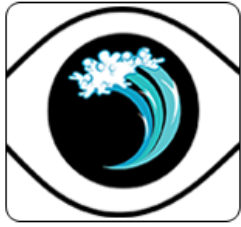
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Eyes on the Rise

Local Septic Tanks Threatened by Rising Groundwater

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By Toni-Ann Ferguson, Karina Gandylyan and Garfield Williams

eyesontherise.org

MIAMI GARDENS – Drenched in sweat, Garth Bowas walked back to his truck, leaving a trail of muddy boot prints behind him. He wiped the beaded sweat from his forehead and took a breath of relief.

“I wouldn’t change my job for the world,” he said.

A septic technician for Mr. C’s Plumbing and Septic in Miami Gardens for five years, Bowas finds himself most days dealing with mud and muck, cleaning, repairing, and installing drain fields and septic tanks – tanks that soon might be flooded-out due to sea level rise throughout South Florida.

“Septic tanks are just another business but it is solving people’s problems,” said Kemble Etrick, the vice president and operations director at Mr. C’s.

How tanks work

But in Miami-Dade County, anything that has to do with water – and wastewater – isn't just “another business.” Theirs is one that deals with immediacy and can have a real impact on the health of neighborhoods, as septic tanks are used to dispose of wastewater from toilets and “graywater,” water that comes from people's showers and dishwashers.



Workers suck sewage from a Miami Gardens septic tank.

“We tend to be like an emergency service,” Ettrick said. “When people call us their toilets aren't flushing and that's no fun.”

Septic systems use microorganisms to filter out bacteria, viruses and other disease-causing pathogens before releasing some of the water it holds back into the

environment. Remaining waste needs to be collected and disposed of by professionals, usually once every few years to prevent damage to the system and a possible back up of fluid into people's homes and onto their grass.

The problem

Rising water tables due to sea level rise is crowding out many septic tanks in Miami Gardens and across South Florida – and both city and [county officials are looking for ways to deal with aging tanks and systems](#) before homeowners and businesses are left swimming in sewage.

For people like Bowas, however, even with possible changes to area sewage problems, he will always be in high demand – even on holidays. Smiling while on-call at Mr. C's on July 4, Bowas shrugged his shoulders when he said, “I should be home lighting up my grill right now.”

