

# LOCAL/REGIONAL

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## Regulator loses job with HRS

### Engineer cites 'cozy' relations

By JOHN PACENTI  
Associated Press

MIAMI — (AP) — The top research engineer involved with regulating sewage treatment in Florida has been fired after criticizing two important studies on sewage pollution that threaten Florida's coastline.

Jerry Klechhammer contends he was fired in December by his bosses at the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services' on-site sewage program because of a whistle-blower complaint he filed.

On Oct. 18, 1993, Klechhammer formally alleged that a contractor had botched a \$500,000 project in the Tampa area to measure how sewage effluent from septic tanks pollutes groundwater.

An estimated 40,000 to 60,000 septic tanks are installed annually in Florida. But some environmentalists fear that septic tanks may be polluting groundwater in areas where it is near the surface, as well as leaking nutrient-rich sewage effluent into coastal waters, contributing to algae blooms that threaten marine life.

Last fall, Klechhammer also complained that a second important study on sewage treatment

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## HRS regulator fired after complaining about sewage

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was being sabotaged by favoritism toward the contractor — the same company involved in the Tampa project.

The second study is critical to protecting one of Florida's most fragile coastal environments — the Keys and its necklace of coral reefs — from sewage pollution.

The study involves testing sewage treatment alternatives to septic tanks. Construction of the test project in the Keys was supposed to begin in October, but still hasn't started because of the controversy.

"The main issue here is the reef and the coastal water quality," says Brian Lapointe, a marine scientist who was among the first to note the sewage pollution problems. "This is really the worst environment for septic tanks."

At the center of Klechhammer's complaints over both sewage studies is Ayres Associates, a consulting company headquartered in Madison, Wis., that was awarded both contracts.

Klechhammer contends that Ayres has benefited from a cozy relationship with officials in the state's on-site sewage program and the Florida Septic Tank Association. He maintains that the septic tank association, whose members sell and install septic tanks, wants to make sure state environmental regulations governing septic tanks aren't toughened.

Ayres has received nearly \$1.6 million in state contracts since 1986, and its top official in Florida, regional Vice President Damann Anderson, recently was appointed to the septic tank association's board of directors.

"The good old boy network sure exists," Klechhammer says. "I thought justice would prevail, but it never did. ... They wouldn't let me do my job, which was to protect the environment."

HRS and Ayres officials defend the Tampa and Keys projects and portray Klechhammer as a disgruntled employee who failed to complete his assignments. They say they have done nothing wrong and see no conflict of interest in having a top Ayres official serving on the septic tank association's board.

Klechhammer "has expended most of his time trying to find problems with past research efforts," wrote Eanix Poole, head of the on-site sewage program, in Klechhammer's evaluation.

Anderson, the Ayres executive, says the criticism of his company is unjustified.

"I don't know what they have against us, but for some reason or another they are trying to harm us," Anderson said.

Jim Harvey, a consultant who used to work for the South Florida Water Management District, said Ayres is known in the industry as a "1-800-No-Problem company."

"Even though it is pretty much known that a problem exists, the consultant finds that no problem exists or the problem is not serious enough to necessitate any change, thus going against common sense, rationality and predominance of scientific opinion," said Harvey, who now runs a consulting business called Florida Government Relations.

Klechhammer was hired in 1992 as an engineer to oversee sewage projects on individual properties throughout the state. He slowly became suspicious of the Ayres project in Tampa, which was to measure the level of protection provided by the 2-foot buffer of soil now required between a septic tank's effluent discharge and the underground water table.

The \$400,000 project, which involved building a lysimeter testing station, was paid for with a \$3 surcharge on septic tanks.

The septic tank association was vitally interested in the study's

### The engineer says Ayres' relations with the state are 'cozy.'

findings because requiring a wider buffer could make it more expensive or even off limits to build septic tanks in Florida's coastal regions.

Klechhammer found fault with the Ayres testing station because it was built on a site at the University of South Florida where he says the water table exceeds 20 feet below ground.

HRS, which used the study's findings to justify maintaining the current 2-foot buffer, says Klechhammer's criticism of the site's deep water table was irrelevant because the high-tech lysimeter can manipulate conditions.

But two University of Florida professors, who looked into the

project as part of Klechhammer's whistle-blower complaint, found problems with that manipulation.

"The soil in a lysimeter must be undisturbed," said the evaluation by Professors Bent Christensen and Kirk Hatfield. "That can hardly be the case in the USF lysimeter where the pan catching the infiltration was pushed, probably jacked into position."



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