



'I Can Do This'

When onsite contractors failed to take proper care of his system, Doug Hensarling did it himself — then went into the maintenance business

By Doug Day

When he couldn't find onsite system service that lived up to his needs, Doug Hensarling decided he would just learn to do it himself. His dissatisfaction started him down a new path in life: He now owns Aerobic System Inspection & Maintenance, based in Bryan, Texas.



His onsite venture began in 2002 when he gained certification to do his own maintenance on an aerobic treatment system for a house he had purchased a few years earlier. Texas law requires a maintenance contract for all aerobic systems, but allows people with a Class D Wastewater or an Installer 2 license to do their own maintenance. The decision to get the wastewater license quickly led Hensarling to a new career.

While he doesn't make generalizations about the onsite industry in Texas, he found his own experience with contractors less than satisfactory. He says those he worked with or observed did not seem people-friendly. Contractors and homeowners often ended up battling over how to care for the systems.

He knows that contractors have to question customers about how they use their systems, and that some owners will abuse them, but he found most properly installed systems to be robust and healthy. "Under normal circumstances, homeowners are not going to upset them that

easily," he says.

Taking charge

Hensarling "had frustrations" with paying money for a maintenance contract with the company that installed his system. "I never saw the guy; he would never come and fix anything," he recalls. "He would never return my phone calls. So I was either going to pay him again to do nothing or take care of it myself."

Hensarling acquired his Class D wastewater license in January 2002. It allowed him not only to service his own system but also to sell his services to others.

Aerobic systems are common around Bryan, near College Station, about 90 miles northwest of Houston. "We have hardpan clay soil from six inches down to about three feet," Hensarling says. "We don't have nearly enough sand, and the clay is expansive. During the winter it will get just as mushy and soft as can be, and then during the summer it's hard as a rock with cracks so big you're afraid to drop your car keys."

While he had no intentions of starting a business, the local health department had other ideas. “We had been conversing back and forth, and they were keeping track of me to make sure I did what I was supposed to do as a homeowner,” Hensarling says. “They encouraged me to take on some systems because they said, ‘There are a lot of people who are in your boat. Since you can sympathize with them, maybe you can work with them.’”

And that’s how Aerobic System Inspection & Maintenance (ASIM) got its start in February 2002. At first, Hensarling did aerobic system maintenance on weekends while working as an engineer for the local cable TV company. “Before I knew it, it looked like it could grow into a real business,” he says.

Which it has. Hensarling now operates from his base in Brazos County (population 160,000) and serves four adjacent counties.



Business takes off

From the start, he found there was plenty of information available about aerobic maintenance for anyone willing to study and attend trade shows. “It just seems that if people would listen and utilize what they’re taught — it would sure go a long ways on maintenance and save the homeowners a lot of money,” he says.

Two years into the business, he found himself tired of working seven days a week and gave up his cable TV job to pursue what he calls “a once-in-a-lifetime shot” at owning a business. “I had already absorbed the first year’s worth of hardship when the business couldn’t afford to pay me a salary,” he says.

Now, two years after making onsite maintenance his full-time career, Hensarling has more than 360 aerobic system customers with maintenance contracts. He also offers repairs on conventional systems. As of now, it’s a small company, run by Hensarling and his wife, Kim, with one employee. He gets three or four calls a week from people whose maintenance contractors will not or cannot fix their systems.

He has also expanded into installation. In the early days of his company, he would help an installer from time to time. The experience with Kenneth Davis of AXIS Enterprises, who is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Texas Onsite Wastewater Association, allowed him to get his Installer 1 license for conventional systems, and then the higher Installer 2 license, which authorizes him to install a wide variety of systems. He installs about a dozen systems a year, usually aerobics.

Hensarling installs mainly Clear-stream aerobic treatment systems and is certified for Hoot, Southern, Hydro-Action, Cajun Aire, Aqua Safe, Aqua Aire, and Norweco, for both maintenance and installation. “If someone requests a certain brand, that is what they will get,” he adds.

Hensarling has installed conventional septic systems using evapotranspiration beds, gravel and pipe, and gravelless pipe. “Mostly, we install aerobic treatment systems with surface spray,” he says. “I have a handful of maintenance contracts for subsurface drip but have yet to install one.”



Insight of a Customer

The Texas regulatory model requires homeowner education about how aerobic systems work, but Hensarling doesn’t think they need to know too much. “Just so the customer is aware that there is a septic system out there, and no matter what they put down the drain, that’s where it’s going to go,” he says.

He tells customers that, “We’re trying to cultivate microorganisms to work in our favor. We need to make sure we don’t kill them, and at the same time give them something they can eat.”

He also explains the details of how a system works, what each tank is supposed to do and why, what he will check during his inspections, and the theory behind an aerobic treatment system. “Just having

somebody aware of what's going on in their system and what the do's and don'ts are goes a long way," he says.

While an installer or maintenance person may deal with these issues every day, perhaps several times a day, Hensarling tries to remember that customers rarely think about their systems — about three times a year (Texas requires residential system inspections at least every four months).

When he does find a problem, he explains it fully — in writing — but also checks to see if the system may be the problem rather than something the homeowner is doing. If there is a buildup of scum in the clarifier, he explains the normal cause — hydraulic overloading — and how to prevent it.

Before writing the finding into a report or talking to the customer, he says, "I'm checking to make sure the aeration is sufficient and that there's nothing chemical going on in the water that may be killing all the bugs." That way, he can do more than point out a problem: He can provide a solution that is effective for that customer's circumstances.

Combating odors

Hensarling doesn't expect his customers to remember everything they are told, and realizes they don't really care until problems arise. "That's when people get attentive," he says. "They really start to listen when it hits their pocketbook."

His maintenance work has helped him understand what is needed for a good system installation. Aerators are a common source of his customers' most common complaint: a smelly system. "Quite frequently we run across issues where it's just simply aeration," he says. "The aerator may be running, but there might not be enough air being delivered to the aerobic treatment unit. It could be anything from a broken air line to clogged air lines to aerators that just can't put out enough air."

He sees systems that aren't level, systems with electrical problems, and tanks, both concrete and fiberglass, that aren't watertight. "Mainly, it's not the tank itself, it's just making sure that the seals are good," he says. Either type, he adds, can absolutely be made watertight. "We water test all of our installations."

So far, none of his maintenance or installation customers has decided to follow his path and become certified to do their own maintenance. "I had one customer who was an advocate for that cause," he says. "He was waiting for that day that it became legal."



When the local health department approved him, Hensarling sat down with the customer to go over everything he had to do for maintenance and inspections. "He decided at that point in time that it just wasn't his cup of tea and he continued to pay me to do it," Hensarling says. Onsite system maintenance may not be for everybody, but for some people, like Doug Hensarling, it's just what they've been looking for.

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