

By Bob Crossen

Rebuilding Trust in Water

Formed in 2010, the Water Well Trust (WWT) is a 501(c)3 organization created by the Water Systems Council (WSC) to provide clean water to American families living without access to safe drinking water. WWT recently expanded its work in Georgia to 10 more counties with a federal grant. WQP Associate Editor Bob Crossen spoke with Margaret Martens, WSC executive director and program director for WWT, about Georgia and future WWT efforts.

BOB CROSSEN: *What kinds of projects is WWT doing in Georgia?*

MARGARET MARTENS: The WWT has completed two projects in Georgia. The first one was in Jones County, Ga., where a minority community had been living with contaminated, shallow, hand-dug wells for more than 10 years. A public water system (PWS) had been promised, but never was completed.

The second project we completed in Ben Hill County in 2014. There we replaced a failing PWS for a small community of 20 homes and two churches with wells. It has been estimated it would [have] cost \$600,000 to repair the PWS. WWT drilled eight wells, and the county supplied wells to the churches and several rental properties. Total cost was \$81,200, an 85% cost savings to the county.

WWT is now on its third project in Georgia, where it has secured a \$140,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Household Water Well Systems (HWWS) grant and a \$56,000 match from WSC member companies. We have targeted 10 counties in Georgia.

CROSSEN: *How underserved are some of the communities in which WWT gets involved? How important are WWT's projects?*

MARTENS: We assist low-income families that cannot afford to pay for public water supplies, and those who live in areas where the extension of public water supplies to serve them doesn't make economic sense for them, for the public water supply owners, or for federal, state or local funding sources. Often, the

extension of PWS out to these rural areas is cost-prohibitive to all.

Usually these communities have poverty rates of 20% or greater. They must haul water for things like flushing toilets and doing laundry, but this water is not potable, so they must also buy bottled water for cooking and drinking. They spend a disproportionate amount of their small incomes on getting water. One of the things that I find most upsetting is that I am told by clients with children their children are being bullied at school because they cannot bathe or get their clothes washed like others can.

CROSSEN: *What is the biggest barrier to getting clean water to people in these communities?*

MARTENS: As usual, it is funding. As stated above, it costs a lot of money to run PWS lines out to these rural communities. Low-income families often do not qualify for financing from banks and other traditional lenders.

CROSSEN: *Besides outreach, what can be done to help these communities access cleaner water?*

MARTENS: It is important that federal programs like the USDA HWWS grants remain in the federal budget so they can help provide financing for these projects. The WWT is always

looking for additional funding sources and accepts donations on its website.

CROSSEN: *What projects are next for WWT?*

MARTENS: The WWT submitted its latest HWWS grant application that, if funded, will allow us to go to work in seven counties in South Carolina that were hard hit by last year's historic flooding. A 1,000-year level of rain slammed these contiguous counties during the October 2015 North American storm complex associated with Hurricane Joaquin.

The disastrous storm dumped more than 2 ft of rain on South Carolina, resulting in flooding throughout the state, including massive and unprecedented flooding in the seven-county target area. In addition to the tragic loss of life and billions of dollars in infrastructure damage, the storm complex ruined numerous water wells among the low-income and largely rural target population. **WQP**

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Margaret Martens