

## Get the solids out of the Shannon

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Suppose there were four thousand boats on the Shannon, all of them fitted with holding-tanks and half of them needing to be pumped out at a weekend. And suppose that, allowing for moving the boat into and out of the special pump-out berth, pumping out took on average half an hour per boat. That's one thousand pumping hours, spread over say 30 daylight hours at the weekend. We'd need 33 pump-outs working flat out. There are 13 and (to put it politely) they don't always work.

### Reasons for doing nothing

I reckon that most boat-owners and hire-firms and other users do not favour polluting the waterways: most people would prefer to avoid discharging toilets into the water. But there is little incentive for private owners to do anything at present because we are aware that

- fitting a holding-tank, at least in an older boat, can be awkward and expensive. I looked at my own boat and decided that its engine space would have to be redesigned completely to fit a tank: the sheer hassle and the possible cost put me off
- the pump-out system is inadequate and unreliable, and the need to pump out before returning to base could come to dominate the planning of a weekend trip. If you're based in the Inner Lakes, would you divert to Athlone or to Lanesborough to empty your holding-tank on a Sunday evening — even if you could be sure the pump-out would be working?
- most hire boats have holding-tanks but most don't use them
- there is little sign of enforcement of the bye-laws banning discharges.

### Getting our act together

The present system is a shambles. There are not enough pump-outs, they're in the wrong places and even if all of them were always working they couldn't cope with the potential demand. Responsibility seems to be divided: Waterways Ireland has bye-laws that forbid discharges but it relies on local authorities to install and maintain pump-out facilities and it assumes that boat-owners and hire firms will install and use holding-tanks. Nobody is in charge: nobody is managing the system or trying to ensure that we actually get the solids out of the Shannon. But under the Water Framework Directive a River Basin Management Plan, tackling pollution at source, has to be published by 2009 at the latest, so we have to get our act together within the next few years.

The deficiencies of the present system have one advantage: we can start planning with a clean sheet. That planning should, I suggest, involve a joint committee for each of the main areas of the Shannon and for each other waterway. Each committee might have representatives of Waterways Ireland (where it is the authority), the local IWAI branch, the local authorities in the area, local hire-firms and marina-owners and other groups like the anglers. It should be charged with coming up with a realistic plan for its own area.

## **Not just holding-tanks**

We need not assume that prevention of pollution requires installation of holding-tanks. One sensible first step would be to reduce the amount of waste that passes through boat toilets of any kind: we need good shore toilets that are kept clean. For onboard use, some owners, like myself, will want to consider cheaper alternatives to the holding-tank: we consider portable toilets on page 29.

Nonetheless, for many boaters the holding-tank will be the most sensible option. (A fortune awaits sellers and installers of holding-tanks in the next ten years.) However, although public harbours need pump-outs, I don't think they can or should be the backbone of the system as they are at present. They should merely supplement the provision of pump-outs at private marinas and IBRA harbours.

For the operators of private marinas, the pumping out of boats, on behalf of their owners, is a new income-generating service. No need for owners to rush back on Sunday evening to queue for the pump-out: operators, with mobile pumps, could carry out the work during the week. For hire firms, pumping out will undoubtedly be a burden, but it's one that has to be faced.

What of marinas and harbours that are not connected to the main sewerage system? Local authorities must make it possible for sewage trucks to discharge into the main system. If necessary, Waterways Ireland might commission a lavender boat, a sewage tanker, to collect sewage from several harbours and transport it by water to a suitable disposal point. Such a boat might also be the best solution for canal live-aboards.

Once the proper infrastructure, and arrangements for management and monitoring, have been set up, boat-owners could be given a year or two to make their boats compliant; boats should be inspected regularly after that to ensure that sea-toilets were sealed.

More on holding-tanks in the next issue. In the meantime, I would be grateful for weekly reports on the status of the pump-outs so that I can keep the website updated.

