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SINKING IN IT

An Astrodome-sized sinkhole is undermining the tiny East Texas town of Daisetta. The burg of approximately 1,000 people is literally collapsing on itself, tumbling into a chasm 250 feet deep and several football fields across that first appeared in early May. Some residents and environmentalists blame the sinkhole on erosion caused by oil field waste pumped into deep underground wells. The town has been featured on network television news and in *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Unnoticed by most media, residents 45 miles to the west, in rural Montgomery County east of Conroe, are fighting to block an underground injection site for oil field waste that could create environmental and health problems worse than the Daisetta sinkhole.

TexCom Gulf Disposal, a Houston-based waste company, is seeking a permit to sink waste injection wells on a 27-acre site in an increasingly residential section of Montgomery County. As the *Observer* has reported (see "[What Lies Beneath](#)," May 19, 2006), waste injection wells funnel sludge and waste produced in oil drilling and other industrial processes, mixed with water, deep underground. Injection wells litter the state; in 2006, nearly 7 billion barrels of waste were injected under Texas soil. Waste from injection wells can bubble to the surface, pollute ground water, or, as in Daisetta, cause sinkholes.

TexCom has applied to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to establish a class-one injection well, which would allow the company to store wastewater from small industrial sources such as dry cleaners and restaurants. Community associations, city councils, and county commissions representing a combined 250,000 residents, including the cities of The Woodlands and Conroe, have passed resolutions against the permit.

"I'm a mom on a mission," said Jennifer Real, a 39-year-old mother of two who lives a mile and a half from the proposed site. She said the injection wells could contaminate the underlying aquifer and leak to the surface through hundreds of abandoned oil wells in the area.

Geologists working for the county have studied TexCom's plan and concluded it could pollute drinking water for hundreds of thousands. The county's groundwater conservation district said in a release opposing the permit that the plan poses "an unreasonable risk of contamination of the aquifers that make up the water supply of a significant number of people in Montgomery County."

The company maintains that waste won't end up in the drinking water. "TexCom's proposal applies proven deep well injection practices that will completely isolate wastewaters from drinking water sources and therefore represents the safest disposal option," said company spokesman Justin Keener.

Area lawmakers, including Republican state Sen. Tommy Williams of The Woodlands have written letters to the TCEQ opposing the permit. Still, in late April, two administrative law judges recommended that TCEQ approve it. TCEQ commissioners will hold a final hearing on the case in the next several weeks. At press time, no date had been set.