



# Fact Sheet

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA • DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Act 537 #3

## SEWAGE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

### Ensuring Long-Term Use of On-Lot Systems Through Proper Operation and Maintenance

The Pennsylvania Sewage Facilities Act (Act 537 of 1966) requires all municipalities to develop and maintain an up-to-date sewage facilities plan to protect public health from waterborne diseases, prevent future sewage disposal problems, and protect the quality of the state's surface and ground waters.

As part of a municipal sewage plan update, developing a sewage management program should be considered by the municipality. It may be required when sewage malfunctions are widespread in an area, and endanger public health by discharging onto a public area or private property, or threaten to contaminate drinking water supplies. The management program ensures that sewage systems are properly operated and maintained. Properly designed and installed systems function better and longer with maintenance. Without operation and maintenance activities, systems may either fail completely or function well below their capabilities, quickly jeopardizing the efforts and resources devoted by a municipality to assure proper design and installation of these systems.

Municipal sewage management programs can be as simple or as comprehensive as warranted, based on each municipality's needs and resources. This fact sheet explains the importance of municipal sewage management programs and how they are developed by municipalities to meet their needs for individual and community on-lot sewage systems.

#### ***What options are available for establishing a Sewage Management Program?***

Municipalities have established numerous approaches to sewage management in Pennsylvania. While existing management programs range from a simple pumping or maintenance permit program to a more complex municipal inspection program, the one factor that municipalities must keep in mind is that the management programs must be based on the specific needs and resources of each municipality.

In developing a sewage management program, a municipality has the option of selecting periodic inspections of septic systems as part of its management program if it believes that the inspection approach is appropriate. DEP does not mandate this inspection approach; it is an option available to municipalities. Under the municipal inspection program, a municipal employee (usually the Sewage Enforcement Officer) conducts periodic inspections of the septic system. The inspector obtains access to properties through municipal ordinances, easements or municipal ownership of individual systems.

#### ***Is sewage system maintenance cost-effective?***

Yes. Maintaining properly installed sewage systems can extend the life of those systems and save the costs

of repairing or replacing malfunctioning systems. In the case of malfunctioning systems, once they are repaired, sewage management programs can help prevent future problems from occurring.

Municipalities faced with malfunctioning systems often have to extend sewer lines for great distances, which is very costly to the affected property owners. In other cases, municipalities have dealt with malfunctioning individual on-lot systems by connecting the affected homes to a single community on-lot system. This, however, can result in future malfunctions of these systems if the municipality does not have a management plan that commits the municipality to proper operation and maintenance of these systems.

#### ***Are there existing agencies that can be extended to cover operation and maintenance requirements?***

Yes. Municipal governments with suburban and rural residents are involved in the on-lot sewage system permitting program administered through local agencies. The permit program involves testing proposed sites, reviewing designs and conducting final inspections of installed on-lot systems. The extent of the requirements under the permit program stops there.

Sewage management programs may be administered by local agencies to extend oversight of these permitted systems by requiring maintenance and inspections. This assures that the special care and attention taken to proper design and installation are not diminished by the lack of maintenance.

### ***Are there minimum requirements for Sewage Management Programs?***

Yes. Minimum maintenance standards were established in regulation (25 PA Code, Chapter 71) to make sure that management programs carry out at least the minimum activities necessary to maintain on-lot systems.

These standards include:

- removal of septage from the treatment tanks once every three years or following a tank inspection that reveals the need for septage removal
- maintenance of surface contouring around the system to divert stormwater and to protect the system from damage
- water conservation requirements
- provisions for septage pumping and disposal
- requirements for holding tank maintenance

### ***How can a municipality manage individual on-lot systems?***

Most municipalities have areas that can never be served by public sewage facilities. These areas may contain suitable soils but have scattered malfunctioning on-lot systems that can cause public health hazards. Repairing individual systems as they malfunction typically does not solve a problem permanently because the improper maintenance that caused the initial problem has not been dealt with.

Instead, municipalities faced with this situation should assess their options for the long-term needs, repair and replacement of these malfunctions through a sewage facilities plan. In going through the planning process, municipalities assess their administrative, technical, financial and management options. However, even proper planning may not assure long-term, functional systems if a sewage management program is not established.

Municipalities should identify all malfunctioning systems in the affected area and determine the suitability of the soils, geology and site conditions for the use of on-lot systems. For the management of on-lot systems, the sewage facilities plan should establish

a management ordinance, evaluate required septage management needs (pumpers, disposal options) and develop administrative and legal procedures to assure that septic tanks are maintained.

### ***How can a municipality manage community on-lot systems?***

Malfunctioning on-lot sewage disposal systems are often located in areas that have poor soils or small lot sizes. These conditions may make it impossible to repair or replace these systems on an individual lot-by-lot basis.

Municipalities faced with this situation should assess their options for using community on-lot systems through a sewage facilities plan to meet their long-term needs. In going through the planning process, municipalities can assess their administrative, technical, financial and management options. However, even proper planning may not assure long-term, functional community on-lot systems if a sewage management program is not established.

Municipalities should identify all of the malfunctioning systems and locate and obtain access for potential sites for the use of a community on-lot system. Easements or land acquisition should be pursued for the treatment system and collection/conveyance systems. Sewage facilities planning, design and permitting approaches should be initiated.

The operation and maintenance of community on-lot systems is low-cost and not technically difficult, but the lack of adequate maintenance may cause irreversible system damage. The best approach for management of community on-lot systems is for the municipality to own, operate and maintain the treatment system and collection and conveyance lines.

### ***Is financial and technical assistance available for municipalities to develop or update sewage facilities plans?***

Yes. Municipalities can apply to DEP for up to 50% reimbursement of the cost of preparing a sewage facilities plan.

Additionally, to assist municipalities in the development of their sewage management programs, DER has several model ordinances that reflect the requirements typical of the different programs. The "pump" model ordinance reflects the simplest approach to a sewage management program, while the ordinance for a municipal inspection program is the most complex approach. Municipalities should keep their programs as simple and effective as possible to meet their needs.

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For more information, contact your regional office.

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