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Management of Onsite Wastewater Systems

Over the past several years, methods for improving onsite wastewater treatment have been developed across the country. Some health departments in Michigan have adopted the use of these technologies for improving the quality of water before it is discharged to the soil absorption system or drainfield. The use of alternative systems has provided documentation of the importance of regular management of these systems. While it is generally required that owners have a management contract, there has not been a rigorous procedure for assuring that maintenance of systems is being done. Often times, after a couple of years, owners find that their systems are working well and they drop the maintenance contract.

Studies done in others parts of the country show that **all onsite wastewater systems benefit from professional management**. A study done in 1999 showed that where septic systems are managed by a professional, meaning that they receive a periodic inspection every year or two, systems do not fail. Periodic professional evaluation results in any maintenance that is needed being done in a timely fashion and counsel to the owner regarding necessary changes in use patterns being provided and implemented.

Inspection and maintenance of septic systems and other onsite wastewater treatment systems by a professional can result in avoidance of catastrophic failures that cause public health risks. Prevention of sudden failure can also rid the owner of worry over being surprised by suddenly learning that the system is no longer working and they have to spend a large sum to replace the system.

Several things are happening in Michigan that will nudge onsite wastewater owners toward management. A bill has been introduced in the State Senate (SB-107) that would require that all systems be inspected when a property is sold. Initially, this bill called for all systems to be inspected every five years, but the challenge of implementing such a program resulted in the bill being rewritten to require inspection only at the time of property transaction. This is both fortunate and unfortunate. It is fortunate because it does begin a statewide inspection program, if the bill passes. It is unfortunate because inspections are required only at the time of property transactions and may be requested by the seller rather than the buyer. Inspections are most effective if the inspector has an opportunity to talk with and educate the user about the proper use and maintenance of an onsite wastewater system. However, any process that causes a septic system to be looked at periodically is a step in the right direction.

In the fall of 2000 a task force was assembled to develop a recommendation on how local health departments could more effectively enforce management of alternative onsite wastewater treatment systems. This resulted from an evaluation of the alternative systems in one county which revealed that of 83 systems, only 18 showed any record in the local health department that they were being maintained. The task force has developed recommendations for an approach to gently reminding and then, if necessary, gently forcing homeowners to have and maintain a maintenance program for alternative systems. This will be piloted in the Barry-Eaton District Health Department.

The Michigan Onsite Training and Education Center offers courses in the basics of onsite wastewater treatment, maintenance of onsite wastewater systems, understanding soils for onsite wastewater treatment, and a new class designed to train inspectors of existing systems. It is expected that this new course will be very popular if Senate Bill 107 passes. The schedule of classes for the remainder of the year is shown below:

Basics of Onsite (Onsite Systems 101)	September 12 & 26
Onsite Wastewater Systems Maintenance	October 2-3
Onsite Wastewater Systems Soils Training	October 31 & November 7
Existing Systems Evaluator Training	August 8 & 22

All of the above are two-day courses and participants must attend both days to receive credit for completing the course. For brochures detailing the content of each course and a registration form or for more information, contact Barb Delong at 517 355-4720, delong24@msu.edu.