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A Uniform State Code for Septic Systems?

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The Governor's message to the legislature calls for the development of a state sanitary code to provide uniformity of regulations throughout the state and to establish a program of regular inspection of septic systems and other onsite wastewater treatment facilities. Some jurisdictions in the state have already developed a requirement that septic systems be evaluated each time a property transaction occurs but that is not a uniform practice. It has long been recognized that septic systems are often neglected by homeowners until they experience a problem. The regulatory structure has been such that small systems which treat flows less than 1,000 gallons a day, are regulated by the local health department using locally developed codes. In many locations local health departments administer state rates for flows up to 10,000 gpd. Michigan is the only state that does not have a statewide code to provide an overall regulatory program for onsite sewage treatment and disposal. It appears that will be changing in the near future.

The technology for providing good treatment of wastewater onsite even in areas where the soils are considered inadequate is rapidly advancing. Development of a program that will allow the state to evaluate and accept or reject new technology thus providing more uniformity statewide is needed.

Both research and experience in other states have shown that where regular inspections of onsite wastewater treatment systems is done, failures such as sewage coming to the surface or backing up into a dwelling are averted. Regular inspection and maintenance as required can result in systems working well for a long period of time. Septic systems function amazingly well under total neglect but that doesn't mean that neglect constitutes an adequate program. Convincing homeowners that they need to subscribe to and pay for regular evaluation and maintenance of their systems will be a hard sell. People are accustomed to having a system that is out of sight, out of mind and "free" until catastrophic failure comes. It is anticipated that a new code will provide for use of improved technologies and regular monitoring, maintenance and evaluation of system performance to assure that systems are properly operating within the environmental constraints of a particular site.

It is hoped that the state will widely seek input in the development of a statewide program and that a program that is both environmentally sound and acceptable to system owners can be developed. Much educational programming will be needed to help homeowners accept the need for regular maintenance. MSUE has a good bulletin (WQ-39) in the form of a records keeping folder for use in homeowner education programs. Please contact me if you would like help with educational meetings related to onsite and small community wastewater systems.