

ACT 537 - SEWAGE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS - PART I

Ensuring Long-Term Use of Onlot Systems Through Proper Operation and Maintenance

The Pennsylvania Sewage Facilities Act (Act 537) requires all municipalities to develop and maintain an up-to-date sewage facilities official plan to protect public health from diseases, prevent future sewage treatment problems and protect the quality of the state's surface water and groundwater. As part of an official plan update, the municipality should consider developing a sewage management program. Such a program to ensure the operation and maintenance of onlot sewage systems should be established before malfunctions are widespread in an area. Malfunctioning onlot treatment systems can endanger public health, degrade the environment and reduce property and community value by discharging onto public areas, private property or contaminating receiving waters including drinking water supplies.

Properly designed and installed onlot treatment systems function better and longer with regular maintenance. Sewage management programs ensure that onlot sewage treatment systems are properly operated and maintained. If operation and maintenance activities are neglected, systems can either fail completely or may function well below their capabilities. This can quickly negate the efforts of a municipality in assuring public health protection through requirements for proper design and installation of these systems.

Municipal sewage management programs can be as simple or as comprehensive as needed and may be based on each municipality's particular 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 onlot sewage systems.

Why should my municipality manage onlot systems?

Most municipalities have areas that can never be physically or cost-effectively served by public sewer facilities. Areas may contain suitable soils but have scattered malfunctioning onlot treatment systems that can cause public health and other hazards. Malfunctioning individual onlot systems will also often be found in areas that have poor soils and/or small lot sizes. It may become impossible to repair or replace these systems on an individual lot-by-lot basis. If your municipality is faced with this latter situation, you can assess your options for using community onlot systems to meet your long-term needs. In any case, repairing onlot systems as they malfunction typically will not solve the problem permanently until regular management and maintenance of onlot systems is established to help keep the problems that lead to malfunctions from recurring.

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 simple pumping or maintenance permit programs to more complex municipal inspection programs, you should base your sewage management program on the specific needs and resources in your municipality.

In developing a sewage management program for your municipality, you may choose from a variety of possible management service options and administrative alternatives. Management options for onlot systems may include such services as:

- Public and homeowner education;
- Regular pumping of tanks;
- Operation and maintenance activities tailored to specific onlot systems or treatment components;
- Testing and monitoring procedures to assess the quality of effluent treatment; and/or
- Periodic inspections to determine system integrity and operational performance and more.

Administrative alternatives for delivering or ensuring your program's management services can range from:

- Maintenance contracts established between a homeowner and the manufacturer or a third-party maintenance provider;

- Operating permits issued by the municipality based on the system's compliance with particular quality or operating standards;
- Direct provision of management services by the municipality or an established service utility; or
- Direct ownership and management of onlot systems by the municipality or an established utility.

There are many examples and variations of these management service options and administrative alternatives in use in municipalities across Pennsylvania. Your local DEP representative can help you learn more about existing sewage management programs.

Are there minimum requirements for Sewage Management Programs?

There are minimum requirements only if a sewage management program is required by regulation. Maintenance standards are listed in Title 25 of the Pennsylvania Code, Chapter 71 §71.73 to make sure that management programs carry out at least the minimum activities necessary to maintain onlot systems (this DEP regulation, as well as others, can be found on-line at www.pacode.com).

Some of the minimum requirements include:

- Removal of septage from the treatment tanks once every three years or following a tank inspection that reveals the need for septage removal (when the tank is determined to be more than 1/3 full);
- Operation and maintenance of the treatment components and appurtenances that make up the system;
- 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; and
- Requirements for holding tank maintenance.

Additional details on how and why to establish a sewage management program can be found in Part II of this fact sheet.

For more information, visit www.depweb.state.pa.us, keyword: Sewage or contact the DEP regional office in your area.

Southeast Region

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Norristown, PA 19401
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Counties: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia

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Meadville, PA 16335-3481
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