



Eliminating Failing Septic Tanks in the United States Final Position Statement

I. Issue Overview

Every year a quarter of the U.S. population discharges an astounding one trillion gallons of raw, untreated wastewater and other toxic materials into more than 21 million septic tanks, nearly half of which do not function properly.

Although septic systems are underground, their 130 years of usage — characterized by lax regulations, minimum standards, improper installation, over-crowding, owner neglect, and a lack of political backing — have brought septic's hazardous legacy literally to the surface.

Hurricanes, and even normal storms, smother huge swathes of cities and states in septic waste. Septic systems — designed with drain fields — leach wastes into waterways and overwhelms them with nitrogen which helps spawn red tides, algae, sargassum, and fish kills visible at beaches, lakes, and rivers from coast to coast jeopardizing not just health (E. coli and other bacteria harmful to humans) but local economies. Meanwhile, rising tides are pushing water tables higher. In some metro areas, septic drain fields are flooded twice daily, putting their aquifers and drinking water at risk.

Essentially, conventional septic systems are developing-world type infrastructure widely accepted — and growing — in a developed-world country. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports more than 25 percent of all new home construction in the U.S. employs septic systems to manage raw sewage disposal, even as failures multiply. Until now, it's been mostly small communities launching septic-to-sewer conversions although some large-scale urban septic eradication projects are in the works.

For decades, public tolerance for septic has declined as increasingly its effects can be seen, smelled, felt under bare feet, and even dictated how much water a household can use to bathe, flush the commode, or wash dishes. Simultaneously, politicians have done little to react to pleas to regulate septic or finance wastewater improvements.

II. WWEMA's Position

As part of any major infrastructure effort, a systematic reduction with the ultimate objective of eliminating failing septic systems, needs to be implemented. Here's how:

Start at the National Level. The EPA recognized septic's threat over 20 years ago in declaring "septic tanks are responsible for most of the groundwater pollution in the U.S." Yet the Agency does not regulate them, nor is septic covered by the Nixon-era Clean Water Act. Data collection

(the true number and locations of U.S. septic installations are unknown), regulations, oversight, and investments are left to state and local officials needing federal leadership. Start leading.

Educate. Emphasize that the health of a family, community, and ecosystem begins with individual responsibility. Many septic owners don't know how they operate and the hazards they pose while millions adhere to a flush-and-forget mentality or ignore maintenance requirements. Often, the integrity of a homeowner's well-maintained system is compromised by his neighbors' unintended negligence. As the health threats and environmental havoc become more apparent, even septic owners are demanding change.

Put Health Risks at the Forefront. Septic systems, many proponents argue, actually help to recharge aquifers--an unintentional admission that drain fields leach into aquifers. But besides liquid, what else? Feces, urine, nitrogen, shampoo and soaps, caffeine, estrogen, ibuprofen artificial sweeteners, acetaminophen, Viagra, and opioids, to name a few. These may pose serious health issues where children are playing near failing systems, or when these chemicals get into our drinking water.

Refute the Pro-Septic Arguments. Most declarations by septic system proponents are pretty disingenuous: We're not polluting. A new system will be unreliable. It's our right to dispose of waste on our own properties. The most common rallying cry is that forcing homes to sewers encourages residential growth. In reality, low cost septic, in lieu of sewers, birthed countless subdivisions that morphed into tightly clustered tank systems numbering in the thousands even though septic was not designed for density.

Recognize the True Cost of Septic Systems. For over a century, developers have utilized septic as a fast \$3,000-to-\$5,000 sewer alternative. Towns and cities expected septic to be a temporary measure until conventional gravity sewers could reach the new growth--then realized that wasn't affordable. Impose assessments so gravity, nitrogen-reducing, or more appropriate technologies are competitive. Earmark this extra money to finance other wastewater infrastructure.

Tackle Nitrogen. Nitrogen-removing systems aren't 100-percent effective but are better than most septic tanks which, even when properly working, don't pull out this nutrient polluter. Several dozen nitrogen-removal systems are approved for use but their cost (\$12,000 to \$20,000) has kept installations to a minimum.

Pony Up Some Money. If septic-to-sewer conversion was affordable, towns and cities across the country would be doing it. Bills seeking funds for tank abatement and sewer connections usually die in the Appropriations Committees of state legislatures. Successful semi-rural projects usually spend years bundling enough money from the county and state and, importantly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Rural Development. Increasingly, it's the urban areas which need help the most.

Call Politicians to Action. Septic tank legislation is non-existent at the federal level and only infrequently successful in state capitals. Common sense proposals like requiring septic tank inspections every five years, requiring repair and pump-out of failing systems, requiring real estate agents to disclose a failing septic system, creating a state map and database of all systems,

developing minimum standards for functional systems, creating enforcement procedures for owners who don't get inspections and contractors who don't report results to owners and the health department need to be promoted

At the Very Least. Consider that the money needed to clean up failing septic's environmental damage wouldn't be needed if septic was regulated — or eliminated — in the first place.

III. Resources

There are a number of resources available that provide information and health impacts related to failing septic systems. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have several resources that can be found at <https://www.epa.gov/septic> and <https://www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart-week>. A section of an EPA report highlighting some of the findings related to the use of septic systems can be found at <https://bit.ly/2BWYbSs>. Resources for homeowners can be found at <https://www.epa.gov/septic/more-resources-homeowners-septic-systems>. In addition, there are a number of resources that can be found at the state level and numerous news stories highlighting the impacts of failing septic systems from New York to Florida and the Caribbean, to the Great Lakes and out to the Pacific Northwest. These links can be found in the addendum to this position paper.

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