



### A New Look at an Old Idea

“Decentralized wastewater treatment systems” is a fancy-sounding name for a familiar idea: onsite wastewater treatment or septic systems. It is also an idea that is sparking new discussion and scrutiny.

These systems treat wastewater without centralized collection (such as a sewer system) and treatment at a wastewater treatment plant. Traditionally, the focus was on septic systems; but today there are enhanced treatment units designed for home

use, as well as hybrid systems.

What is driving this renewed interest in onsite, decentralized wastewater systems? More people are moving to rural communities where sewer systems do not exist and may not be cost effective to install. Often the land on which these people want to build has site characteristics—such as unsuitable soils, steep slopes, high water tables, or inadequate separation distances from wells or water bodies—that preclude the use of traditional septic systems. Also, there are concerns that nutrients and pathogens may find their way into surface and groundwater from improperly sited or malfunctioning onsite systems. Contamination of wells could pose risks to human health.

Indeed, malfunctioning onsite systems are a water quality problem in New York. The 2004 Priority Waterbodies List identifies 301 water quality impacted/impaired segments (water bodies or segments of a water body) in the state that have contributions from failing onsite systems. Of these, one-third have had failing systems identified as a major contributor to impairment.

New York State has a large rural population and a large number of existing onsite systems: over 1.5 million systems that serve more than four million people. Many of these onsite systems are getting older and have not always received the care and maintenance they require. Others may have been improperly designed or installed to begin with.

We need to better manage our existing onsite systems and ensure that all new systems are properly designed and installed. Also, we need to ensure that State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) permit requirements are met where required (see page 48 in this issue of *Clearwaters*). The Department of Environmental Conservation’s Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems Workgroup is working on these and other issues surrounding onsite systems. The workgroup includes representatives from the onsite system industry, the New York State (NYS) Departments of Health, State, and Environmental Conservation, the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation, local health departments, the Environmental Protection Agency, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, and watershed groups.

The issues of proper design, installation, and maintenance of onsite systems are also being addressed through the New York Onsite Wastewater Treatment Training Network, a joint project of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) and the State University of New York at Delhi. A cadre of

industry professionals trains designers, installers, and local code enforcement officers on the proper siting, installation, operation and maintenance, and inspection of onsite systems. In addition, the DEC is working with the New York State Department of Health to update statewide technical standards governing the approval of new onsite systems, and with the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation to help finance new systems or repairs to existing systems. We hope that these efforts and others like them will help focus attention on the importance of properly designing, installing, and maintaining these systems.

Decentralized wastewater treatment systems can provide effective wastewater treatment at a lower cost. Our challenge is to ensure that new systems are properly designed, older systems are properly maintained, and our state’s rich water resources are protected.

—Sandra L. Allen

Director of the NYSDEC Division of Water

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