

Q&A: Changes to the On-site Sewage Program

What is an on-site sewage system?

An on-site sewage system is also called a septic system. A typical on-site sewage system consists of a **septic tank** for settling and pre-treatment and a **sub-surface dispersal field** that uses natural processes to treat the sewage.

What is changing about the on-site sewage program?

Most on-site sewage system installations will require a **notification** to Nova Scotia Environment (NSE) only, rather than an approval. To be eligible for notification, the system and its installation must meet the new On-site Sewage Disposal Systems Standard.

Other changes

- clarify the property owner's responsibility to maintain proper function and maintenance of their on-site system
- clarify the requirement for a property owner to inform NSE of a malfunctioning on-site system or system that results in the release of untreated or partially treated sewage into the environment (such as a straight pipe)
- allow pit privies to be installed without an approval or notification to the department if constructed according to the Standard
- change the title of a "qualified person level 1" (QP1) to a "**professional engineer**"
- change the title of a "qualified person level 2" (QP2) to a "**qualified person**" (QP)
- require a qualified person or professional engineer to submit the notification or application for approval to NSE

When do the changes come into effect?

May 1, 2016.

What does notification involve?

A notification **informs** Nova Scotia Environment that you are installing an on-site sewage system. The notification is checked for completeness only, not reviewed and approved.

The qualified person or professional engineer must

- notify the department before installing the system
- receive a notification receipt from the department before the system can be installed
- submit a 24-hour construction alert to the department before constructing the system
- ensure the installer has a copy of the notification receipt on site at all times while constructing the system

What do property owners need to do to install on-site sewage?

The steps for property owners have not changed. They must first contact a professional engineer or qualified person to look at the site and determine the best kind of system and location. The property owner may experience less paperwork and a shorter wait time.

What's the next step?

The professional engineer or qualified person

- **determines** the best type of system and location
- **submits** a form to Nova Scotia Environment: either a notification or an application for approval.

The property owner then **hires** a certified on-site sewage installer to build the system.

Q&A: Changes to the On-site Sewage Program

Who is responsible for what after installation?

The professional engineer or qualified person

- **inspects** the system
- **issues** a certificate confirming that the system was installed properly
- **gives** a copy of the certificate to the property owner, the local office of Nova Scotia Environment, and the local building official

After the system is installed, the property owner maintains it.

What's Nova Scotia Environment's role in making sure systems are working properly?

The department **audits** a percentage of the on-site system installations.

Can a property owner be the one who notifies the department?

No. Under the regulations, a qualified person or a professional engineer must be the notifier.

Who is considered to be a qualified person?

A qualified person must hold a **certificate of qualification** from Nova Scotia Environment under the On-site Sewage Disposal Systems Regulations. To obtain that certificate, applicants need to submit the following to the department:

- completed application form
- proof of successful completion of the installer and qualified person courses of instruction
- proof of a minimum of 1,000 hours of work experience in the on-site sewage industry, including the installation of at least 6 systems
- required fee
- proof of having professional liability insurance

Who is considered to be an installer?

An installer holds a **certificate of qualification** as an installer from Nova Scotia Environment under the On-site Sewage Disposal Systems Regulations. To obtain a certificate, the following must be submitted to the department:

- completed application form
- proof of successful completion of the installers' course for new applicants
- proof of a minimum of 1,000 hours of work experience in the on-site sewage industry, including the installation of at least 6 systems
- required fee
- proof of having general contractors' liability insurance

Is a list of qualified persons, installers, and professional engineers available?

Yes, there are a few:

Professional engineers, certified installers and qualified people: novascotia.ca/nse/cms/search.asp

Professional engineers registered to practice in Nova Scotia: secure.engineersnovascotia.ca/member-directory/

Waste Water Nova Scotia members: wwns.ca/members.php

Does the department review the notification?

No. Staff check the form for completeness only. They do not review or decide on whether an activity can proceed. Some notification forms are later reviewed during an audit by the department.

The notifier is responsible for providing complete and accurate information and for following the requirements in the On-site Sewage Disposal Systems Standard.

Q&A: Changes to the On-site Sewage Program

Can a notification be revoked?

Yes. The department may cancel a notification if an adverse effect could occur or if the activity is not being conducted in compliance with the Environment Act and any regulations or standards.

What is the property owner's responsibility?

By law, a landowner must have an adequate on-site sewage system and must make sure it is maintained and working properly.

What is required for maintaining or modifying an existing on-site sewage system?

The main requirement is to **pump out** the solid contents of a septic tank. It is recommended that this be done every 3 to 5 years. Property owners are responsible for hiring a certified septic tank cleaner. The pumper will pump out the tank.

If an existing system requires repairs, a certified installer may be able to complete the work without submitting a notification or application for approval to Nova Scotia Environment.

What work does not require a notification or approval?

The following activities do not need a notification or approval, but do need to be done by a certified septic system installer:

- replacing a septic tank, pump, or siphon chamber in the same location as the existing one, or in a location that maintains clearance distances required by the Standard
- diverting sewage away from a water resource or a structure as a temporary measure
- repairing any solid pipe
- replacing sand fill that is not part of the distribution trench or final cover material

Installing a pit privy does not require a notification or approval and does not need to be done by a certified septic system installer if the pit privy is:

- built to protect surface and ground water
- located at least one metre above the maximum groundwater level, bedrock, or highly permeable soils, such as gravel
- constructed at least 15 metres away from any drilled well, at least 30 metres away from any dug well, at least 3 metres away from any property boundary, and at least 9 metres away from any downslope property boundary

Who can install a pit privy?

A property owner may build a pit privy if they can do so in a way that meets these requirements. Otherwise, a qualified person or installer is needed.