



Septic tanks are being targeted by state water board

Issue Date: January 7, 2009

By Steve Adler

The State Water Resources Control Board is calling them Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems, which basically is just a fancy way of saying septic tanks.

These septic tanks, which can be found on virtually every rural property in California, are the latest targets of proposed state regulations—and accompanying fees.

Prompted by AB 885 (Jackson), which was signed by Gov. Gray Davis in 2000, the law requires the regulation of discharges of waste that impair or threaten to impair surface water or groundwater quality. The timeline for implementation of those regulations is July 2010 and the SWRCB is currently holding a series of workshops around the state to gather public comment.

Danny Merkley, California Farm Bureau Federation water resources director, said he has received information that several of the earlier workshops have been very sparsely attended. He urges interested people to make every effort to attend the remaining workshops.

According to SWRCB staff, septic systems, when properly installed, remove bacteria and viruses, but may allow soluble materials resistant to degradation to reach and pollute groundwater and impair the quality of groundwater and nearby surface water.

The proposed regulations state that persons who discharge waste that impairs or threatens to impair waters of the state must file a report of waste discharge with the regional water board.

Water boards may waive the reporting requirement if the provisions of the waiver are complied with. In order to comply, property owners must have their septic tanks inspected for solids accumulations every five years by a qualified service provider. The estimated cost is \$325. Owners whose existing septic systems are within 600 feet of a surface water body that does not meet water quality standards (impaired water body) will be subject to additional requirements.

Where existing septic systems have been identified by a regional water board to be contributing to the water quality impairment (pollution) of nearby surface water bodies, owners of those septic systems within 600 feet of the impaired surface water body will be required to have a qualified professional determine whether the septic system is contributing to the impairment. If so, retrofit of the septic system with supplemental treatment will be required at an estimated cost of \$45,000.

All of the requirements for existing septic tanks will also apply to new septic systems, plus several other requirements, including:

- A qualified professional to perform a site assessment and design of all new septic systems, including determinations of seasonal high groundwater.
- New systems to be constructed by a state-licensed contractor or by the property owner.
- New septic tanks to have effluent devices (filters) that retain solids in excess of 3/16 inches in diameter.
- New septic systems to be designed to maximize soil treatment.
- Three feet minimum depth to groundwater or impermeable layer for conventional septic system.

Two feet minimum depth for systems with supplemental treatment.

- New septic systems that use pumps to have malfunction alarms and emergency tank capacity to store the waste flow for up to 24 hours.
- New septic systems to have an operation and maintenance manual (O&M Manual). These O&M Manuals must be provided to all subsequent property owners.
- New septic systems within 600 feet of an impaired surface water body where existing septic tanks have been identified by a Regional Water Board to be contributing to the impairment to have supplemental treatment systems (\$35,000 approximate cost for a new installation.)

According to the SWRCB timeline, once the workshops are completed, staff will analyze responses and make revisions over the next few months. There will be another 30-day comment period in August, followed by the adoption of the regulations and waiver. Effective date of the regulations would be Jan. 1, 2010, followed six months later by implementation. The six-month delay was stipulated in AB 885.

"In these times of limited resources, why would the state put these requirements on everyone rather than paying attention to specific areas where there are known concerns with contamination of ground or surface water. There's something wrong with priorities when the city of San Francisco is allowed to knowingly dump sewage into the bay following heavy rain events and the state instead goes after all of these individual property owners," Merkley said.

Further details about the proposed regulations and maps of impaired water bodies with septic system discharges may be viewed at www.waterboards.ca.gov.

(Steve Adler is associate editor of Ag Alert. He may be contacted at sadler@cfbf.com.)

Workshops

State Water Board staff is currently conducting 11 workshops around the state on the proposed regulations for Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems, to be followed by a public hearing. Five of the workshops have already taken place.

The remaining workshops, which are all scheduled to begin at 7 p.m., are:

- Jan. 13: Tri-County Fairgrounds, Sierra Street and Fair Drive, Bishop
- Jan. 14: Riverside County Supervisors Chambers, 4080 Lemon St., Riverside.
- Jan. 15: Malibu High School, 30215 Morning View Dr., Malibu.
- Jan. 22: Fresno Unified School District Board Chamber, 2309 Tulare St., Fresno.
- Jan. 27: Wells Fargo Center for the Arts Merlot Theater, 50 Mark West Springs Road, Santa Rosa.
- Jan. 28: Eureka High School, 1915 J. St., Eureka.

The public hearing is scheduled for Feb. 9 at 1:30 p.m. at the Byron Sher Auditorium, Cal EPA Building, 1001 I St., Sacramento.

Permission for use is granted, however, credit must be made to the California Farm Bureau Federation when reprinting this item.

RSS

Top