

Puget Sound Septic Financing Programs

Regional Financing for Local Septic Management Programs

Problem Statement: Properly functioning septic systems effectively treat wastewater and safeguard health and water quality. There are more than a half million systems around Puget Sound and the systems all need good use and care to work properly. State law requires system owners to evaluate and maintain their systems and directs Puget Sound local health jurisdictions to adopt comprehensive management programs to support this work. The local programs share common elements yet are all uniquely designed and implemented. The programs are complicated and costly to implement. Local dedicated revenue for the programs is limited and uneven and is supplemented by transient state and federal grants. The Puget Sound septic management programs need dedicated, sustainable funding to provide effective services and to help ensure proper use and care of systems.

Background

The task of safely and smartly managing sewage is an old challenge. As investments in sewage infrastructure have increased and treatment technologies have evolved so has our understanding that all systems need good use and care to work properly. This principle applies to the nearly 100 municipal wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) that serve the region's urban areas and to the overlapping half million on-site sewage (septic) systems that mainly serve rural and infill areas.

State regulation of septic systems has steadily strengthened to better address all aspects of designing, building, and using these systems (life-cycle management). The 2005 update to the state on-site sewage rule (Chapter 246-272A WAC) reset standards and expectations on several fronts to facilitate better system operation and maintenance (O&M). The updated rule requires system owners to regularly evaluate and maintain their systems and directs Puget Sound local health jurisdictions (LHJs) to adopt comprehensive septic management plans to support this work. Legislation passed in 2006 requires Puget Sound LHJs to designate marine recovery areas (MRAs) and carry out enhanced programs in areas where septic systems are impacting marine water quality (Chapter 70.118A RCW).

The LHJs adopted management plans in 2007-08 and subsequently designated many MRAs and other sensitive areas where they engage directly with homeowners to ensure the systems are inventoried, inspected, and properly maintained (see RCW 70.118A.050). The septic management plans are complicated and costly to implement. They share many common program elements, yet all are uniquely designed and implemented. The plans spell out expectations for system operation and maintenance and are therefore commonly called O&M programs or septic management programs.

At all levels of government, financing for decentralized (on-site) wastewater programs and infrastructure has dramatically lagged behind public investment in centralized WWTPs. Local O&M program costs are covered by a combination of local revenues and transient state and federal grants. Local financing for the programs is very limited and uneven. A few counties have successfully established local financing to support at least partial program implementation.

To help jump-start the Puget Sound septic management programs, the state legislature has allocated approximately \$6 million for these programs since 2005. DOH administers this funding. However, the state funding was not intended to cover full program costs and was not intended to serve as a long-term financing mechanism for the Puget Sound O&M programs. This pass-through state funding has diminished since the 2007-09 biennium. Federal Puget Sound funding administered by DOH has helped to further supplement local needs, injecting nearly \$2.7 million into the programs since 2011, but this funding is not expected to continue indefinitely. In 2009, the Puget Sound counties conservatively estimated unmet program implementation costs at approximately \$4 million annually.

The Puget Sound septic management programs need dedicated, sustainable funding to provide effective services, to help ensure good use and care of systems, and to better protect public health and water quality.