Sewerage System Regulation Amendments

On June 25, 2010, some changes were made to the Sewerage System Regulation (via OIC 476) to enhance the system of onsite wastewater management in B.C. The changes were discussed with the governing body for practitioners in this field, the Applied Science Technologists and Technicians of BC (ASTTBC), the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM), Health Authorities, and the Ministry of Community and Rural Development.

They address issues for:

- advancing the work of the UBCM/MHLS/MCRD Sewerage System Working Group
- enhancing oversight and training provisions within the Sewerage System Regulation
- coordinating groundwater/well and sewerage system setback provisions.

The amendments cover:

- Allowing homeowner installation of onsite sewerage systems under the supervision of a Registered Onsite Wastewater Practitioner (ROWP).

- Improved measures for preventing health hazards.

- Ensuring consistent setback provisions in legislation addressing location of wells and sewerage systems (with allowance for variance approvals).

- Ensuring all training agencies go through the same ASTTBC accreditation process to ensure students achieve the required competencies. The BC Onsite Sewage Association (BCOSSA) training program will now be subject to the same accreditation process as other training agencies.

A summary of the changes:

1. Homeowner installations

- This amendment will allow homeowners to contribute to the installation of systems on their own property under the supervision of a ROWP.
- This amendment can help homeowners reduce their installation costs, and help address shortages of trained professionals which may exist in a given area.
- UBCM has supported this amendment as a means of helping homeowners reduce onsite sewerage installation costs, while ensuring ROWP oversight.
- ASTTBC has issued a bulletin to all ROWPs advising them of their supervisory responsibilities for such homeowner installations, and their accountability for signing off on these systems.
- Registered Practitioners continue to assume all responsibility for the system being installed. They are expected to oversee the work performed by homeowners, and are required to sign the letter of certification to be filed with the Health Authority.

2. Health hazard provision

- In most circumstances, complaints involving the work and services provided by a ROWP will be dealt with through ASTTBC following up with the ROWP to ensure that standards of practice are being adhered to. Where ASTTBC finds the ROWP has made an error or violated the Code of Ethics, ASTTBC will hold the ROWP to account.
- Where outstanding health hazard concerns exist, ASTTBC will work in partnership with Health Authorities to address the concern. Under this amendment, Health Authorities are specifically authorized to take health hazard abatement measures respecting planned onsite sewerage systems to protect public health if warranted.
- The Sewerage System Regulation provision for filing plans with Health Authorities remains the same. Section 8(2) (b) under the Sewerage System Regulation continues to require that plans be signed off by the ROWP and filed with the Health Authority. No additional plan opinions or approvals in accordance with section 2.1(1) (d) from the Health Authority are required during the filing process.

3. Setback distances between Sewerage Systems/Holding tanks and drinking water wells

- The OIC 476 amendments include a minimum setback distance requirements of 30 meters between drinking water wells and sewerage systems (which includes septic tanks), and 15 meters between wells and holding tanks. This setback provision applies to the construction of new systems for which there was no filing before June 25, 2010. It does not apply to systems that were legally constructed before June 25, 2010, or to systems that had filings submitted to the Health Authority before June 25, 2010.
- This setback distance is now consistent with the Public Health Act regulations which requires that wells be located 100 feet (30 metres) from a probable source of contamination (e.g. septic fields/septic tanks).
- Setback distances are less for holding tanks because they are completely contained systems and are periodically pumped out, reducing risk to drinking water wells.
- Holding Tanks are considered to be a ‘last resort’ for residential lots which are either small, or lack the soil structure and depth needed to support a disposal area.
- The 15 meter setback for holding tanks enables development on lots where a septic tank/field system is not an option. They are not commonly utilized in BC.
- In contrast, septic tanks and fields discharge a significant volume of effluent to the environment, particularly households occupied on a year-round basis.
- BC has varied geologic conditions, including the presence of fractured bedrock terrain, and there is risk that untreated septic tank effluent from a compromised septic tank may impact groundwater and drinking water wells. Thus, a 30 meter setback is set as the standard to bring the regulation in line with the Public Health Act regulations on well location (while allowing for variances).
- Flexibility is allowed through a variance provision: a professional hydrogeologist can authorize different setbacks where warranted due to the specific characteristics of a site, such as the soil conditions or slope between a sewerage system and a well.

4. Practitioner Education

- As the certified practitioners who sign off on onsite sewerage system plans and installations, ROWPS must meet the training requirements of the Sewerage system Regulation.
- Until now, the BC Onsite Sewage Association (BCOSSA) was specifically named as a training agency in the Regulation. This was an anomaly because other training agencies in BC were required to have their training programs accredited by the Applied Science Technologists and Technicians of BC (ASTTBC).
- Now, specific reference to BCOSSA has been removed and all training agencies will be subject to the same ASTTBC program accreditation process. This promotes consistency in training standards and encourages training from a variety of sources rather than specified agencies.