

Policy for Reutilization of Existing On-site Sewage Disposal System

PURPOSE

Requests for replacement of home or other structure having been lost by fire or other untoward event, or when the applicant desires to substantially modify an existing structure, or when an existing system's use has been discontinued or utilized under design capacity, may be permitted provided a critical evaluation is conducted by the Environmental Health Specialist, the minimum criteria set forth in this order is met and the proposed use will not constitute an undue hazard to the owners, adjacent properties and beneficial waters. This policy also includes on-site septic system proposals to allow replacement, reuse, expansion, or significant remodeling of existing residential structures.

GENERAL

The Environmental Health Specialist has the primary responsibility for control of on-site sewage disposal systems in the County. The Department, in coordinated effort with the Regional Water Quality Control Board, has substantial responsibility in prohibiting pollution of beneficial waters of the State. In discharging these responsibilities, the Department carries out inspections and issues permits for the construction and modifications of on-site waste disposal systems.

From time to time, homes or other structures utilizing on-site sewage disposal systems are destroyed by fire or other untoward events. Owners may determine that substantial change of use or structural modification of existing structures is needed for a variety of reasons. Disposal systems may have been utilized under their design capacities. These changes and desires may not entirely meet present standards for on-site sewage disposal systems, yet the systems may be adequate to permit safe sewage treatment and disposal. Present standards are designed to optimize safety, effectiveness and longevity and should be applied whenever possible.

It is the desire and intent of the Well and Septic Section to facilitate the goals and desires of owners and applicants for reuse of existing systems or substantial change of use when it can be determined that existing systems, although not meeting presently applicable and preferred standards, will not constitute an undue hazard to the owners, adjacent properties, and beneficial waters. For older systems, this effort is complicated by the use of relatively small systems on less than satisfactory soil or terrain. An additional compromising factor may be the age of the existing system, that is, it may be reaching the end of its expected lifespan. For these reasons, the Department must undertake critical evaluation of any existing system that is proposed for reuse or substantial change of use. The following minimum criteria for reuse of existing systems are set forth in an effort to meet the public needs, yet fulfill departmental obligation to residents and visitors.

AUTHORITY

North Coast Basin Plan (NCRWQCB)
Uniform Plumbing Code, 1985
Sonoma County Code, Chapter 7

This policy supersedes Sonoma County Department of Public Health Administrative Order 88-17.

PROCEDURE

1. Systems unutilized for two (2) years or more are required to meet all current standards and requirements of the Regional Water Quality Control Board.
2. The system must have no history of failure or malfunction either since installation or previously authorized correction or replacement.
3. The system must consist of a two (2) compartment septic tank and a disposal field. Cesspools are not acceptable. The leaching field may be of trench, bed, or construction of a nature previously or presently approved by the Department.
4. Adequate information about the system must exist or be determined to make a judgment as to its adequacy for the use proposed. This information may include, but is not limited to, the following:
 - a) tank size and integrity
 - b) soil percolation rate and winter ground water elevations
 - c) surface area of the absorption system
 - d) construction and materials
 - e) plot plan
5. The proposed effluent quantity shall not exceed the amount previously applied to the system unless it can be established the system was utilized below design capacity. In the event that a substantial increase in flow is proposed, it may be necessary to meet current criteria. In no case shall the original design capacity be exceeded.
6. The proposed effluent quality, in terms of anticipated BOD and suspended solids, shall be at least of a treatment degree equal to that of the original system design.

7. The anticipated residual lifespan of the system shall be at least five years. System lifespan shall be based on knowledge of other similar systems in the immediate area when such information is available. If local area information is not available, lifespan may be estimated on general knowledge of similar systems. Systems in the ground over 15 years can be expected to be near the end of their lifespan and may require additional evaluation for requirements for reutilization under this document.
8. Sufficient area of 100% expansion must exist. Low volume toilets (1.6 gallons/flush) shall be installed. The area shall not be encumbered in any permanent fashion which would preclude its future use for expansion area.
9. The absorption area must not be covered by an impermeable substance which will preclude evapotranspiration.
10. Use of the system will be terminated or curtailed as needed in the event that any significant negative effect on the public health or beneficial waters occurs, or any significant public nuisance is created.

When a proposal for reutilization of the existing septic system cannot be approved because the above listed criteria cannot be met, the Section may work with the applicant and their consultant to determine if an improved on-site disposal method can be provided. When a system for reutilization is proposed, it is highly unlikely that the standards governing new system permitting can be met. It is also understood that the proposal is considerably more than a *repair*, for which we are allowed to pursue the “best possible system” to keep a home from being vacated. At times the best possible repair may be no more than a “gamble”. This approach is clearly not applicable to a proposal for expansion, reuse, replacement, or substantial remodeling of an existing structure. When a replacement system is proposed for expansion, reuse, replacement, or significant remodeling, a waiver must accompany the application and the following conditions must be met:

1. The structure the system is proposed to serve must have been in recent and continuous service. Any structure not in use for the last two years must meet current standards for a new system.
2. The structure may not be in a waiver prohibition area or sewer ban area.
3. The replacement system must be properly sized to accomplish the function for which it is designed.
4. The replacement septic system must provide a clear and positive improvement over the system it is replacing (example: in a high ground water area, a mound system greatly improves the impact on ground water of a standard [36 inch or deeper] septic system).

5. The replacement system, while not meeting today's standard, must not create an undue hazard or risk to the owner's, adjacent properties, and beneficial waters of the State.

6. The replacement system must have a minimum of one hundred percent expansion area available and unencumbered, which meets the same minimum requirements as the proposed primary system.

In the waiver application, these items must be addressed and information provided by qualified consultants (either a Registered Civil Engineer or a Registered Environmental Health Specialist) knowledgeable in on-site sewage disposal, to justify the issuance of a septic system permit. If such a finding cannot be made, the permit must be denied.

Approved by:

Date posted 9/27/02

/s/ Richard L. Holmer

Richard L. Holmer, Operations Manager

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