



## FAQs: Local Agency Management Program for Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems

### Why is the County updating the standards for Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS)?

The State Water Resources Control Board has adopted a policy that modernizes construction standards and siting requirements for the disposal of wastewater on site. **The County is updating construction standards to meet State requirements and to allow the Department of Planning & Building to continue review and permitting of many onsite wastewater treatment systems (OWTS) within the County.** The County's Local Agency Management Program (LAMP) will allow for alternative treatment technologies to be implemented in San Luis Obispo County.

### How does the Local Agency Management Program affect homeowners?

For homeowners or property owners with existing functioning septic systems, there is no change. A homeowner with an existing septic system would be affected if there was a failure of the system or a major remodel on the house and/or other development on the property such as an accessory dwelling unit with plumbing fixtures. Property owners that will be constructing a new OWTS will need to meet the requirements of the approved LAMP.

### What is the difference between a 'septic system' and an 'onsite wastewater treatment system' (OWTS)?

Nothing. The term 'septic system' has been replaced in the industry with 'onsite wastewater treatment system' to reflect the changing technologies in the onsite industry. Conventional septic systems installed 30-40 years ago were designed primarily as disposal systems, the newer technologies treat the wastewater to make it cleaner than conventional technology.

### What are the major changes in the Local Agency Management Program?

**Minimum parcel size for septic systems:** Minimum parcel size *for creating new parcels* will increase to 1.0 acre, current exceptions for 'particularly favorable' infiltration conditions will no longer apply. Installation of a new system on an existing parcel smaller than 1.0 acre may require a supplemental treatment system.

**Engineered design:** All proposed septic treatment systems must be designed by a registered professional. As-built plans will be required for all septic systems that deviate from the originally approved design plans.

**System component setbacks:** Setbacks for building footings, property lines, reservoirs and public water system supply wells will increase from current standards.

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**Replacement of failing systems:** Systems that fail or require corrective action may not be restored to the original design and may require installation of supplemental treatment components.

**Slope allowances:** Septic systems may be permitted on slopes up to 40% with a slope stability report. This is an increase from the current standards.

**Secondary residences and accessory dwelling units:** System capacity and design requirements for secondary residences and accessory dwelling units will change.

**Risers and filters:** All new septic systems will require risers to grade and effluent filters.

**Leach line loading rates:** All leach line loading rates will increase, generally requiring additional leach lines and lines of greater lengths.

**Seepage pit design criteria:** Design criteria for seepage pits will be more restrictive with respect to groundwater separation. The LAMP will allow for the use of seepage pits, and upholds prohibition of hollow seepage pits.

**Supplemental treatment system allowance:** The County will be able to approve and permit alternative and supplemental treatment systems that previously required review by the Central Coast Water Board.

### What is the difference between a conventional and alternative/supplemental OWTS?

A septic system is a small-scale sewage treatment system common in areas with no connection to a municipal sewer. A conventional septic system consists of three main parts: Septic tank, drainfield and soil beneath the drainfield. An alternative system requires engineering considerations beyond a conventional system, to address limiting site conditions (high water table, impervious soil, rock layer, etc.) and/or proper effluent treatment. Most supplemental on-site systems combine the basic elements of conventional septic systems with other more specialized components, such as filters or aerators. Supplemental septic systems typically use one of two treatment technologies – either some sort of filter (sand, fabric, peat) or an aerator.

### Have supplemental OWTS technologies been tested, and are they safe?

Supplemental treatment technologies have been around for over 40 years and are no longer considered experimental. Typically, the additional treatment components will have an NSF certification (National Sanitation Foundation).

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### **Will all new OWTS require supplemental treatment?**

No. Conventional septic systems will still be the standard method of disposing and treating of wastewater onsite. Supplemental systems will be an option to homeowners if setbacks cannot be maintained, typically in cases of high seasonal groundwater or steep slopes.

### **How much does an alternative septic system cost?**

The initial cost will vary depending on the type of technology used. Alternative septic systems are basically miniature wastewater treatment plants, with technology and machinery that can be as complex as those in large municipal systems. They can cost roughly \$15,000 for a basic system or more than \$40,000 for a more complicated system involving mechanical pumps or a mound.

### **Are special permits required for alternative/supplemental septic systems?**

Yes. Supplemental treatment systems will require an annual operating permit from the Planning & Building Department. The permit will require owners to verify that the system is in good working condition and fully operational on an annual basis.

### **Will I be required to upgrade my septic system when I sell my house?**

No. There are no retrofit-on-sale requirements associated with the County of San Luis Obispo Local Agency Management Program.

### **Will the County require me to pump my septic tank and what will happen if I do not pump it?**

No, the County will not require owners to pump their septic tank. However, the County highly recommends all residential septic tanks be pumped every three to five years. This requirement is not codified in the new ordinance; however, letting solids accumulate in the septic tank over time can cause a septic system failure. Septic failures are very costly as they usually require abandoning the existing leach field and finding another area on the parcel suitable for the installation of a new leach field.

### **If a homeowner wants to add an accessory dwelling unit, can it connect to the existing septic system for the main house?**

Yes, but with some limitations. The secondary dwelling would be considered an additional bedroom (or two) and the leach fields and septic tank may need to be expanded. Under the current and proposed ordinance, the leach fields are sized both on the percolation rate of the soil and the number of bedrooms in the structure. If there is inadequate space on the property, or poor soil conditions, an alternative OWTS may be required.