

On-site sewage disposal systems:

A streamlined approval process

The Opportunity

Environment and Labour's Environmental Monitoring and Compliance (EMC) Division oversees the On-Site Sewage Systems Regulations. These regulations govern the installation of septic systems, which operate where municipal sewer and water systems are not accessible. For example, building a new home without nearby services requires an on-site sewage system approval from Environment and Labour.

Through the On-Site Program, government inspector-specialists designed, selected and approved applications for septic systems – and inspected the final installed systems – until 1997. Recently, private individuals have been trained to design, select and approve septic systems, replacing that part of an inspector's work. Giving part of an inspector's duties over to the private sector was supposed to give inspectors more time to do their appointed on-site duty – inspecting the final installed system. It was also supposed to give them more time to do their many other *Environment Act* enforcement duties and protect the environment.

That was the ideal outcome, but reality was different. This new system did not save inspectors any time. Although inspectors were no longer responsible for most on-site work, they still had to review all applications to install on-site systems. Examining thousands of detailed documents takes a lot of time. The construction industry complained of lengthy approval waiting times. Builders could not plan projects efficiently because they could not start construction until they received on-site approvals. Those delays cost money.

In 2003, the province held town hall meetings to review the On-Site Program. It wanted to identify any problems and hear about possible solutions. The construction industry and public reported that the on-site approvals system was slow and inflexible. They recommended that the approvals process be improved.

A member of the Environment and Labour – Environmental Monitoring and Compliance (EMC) team researched other jurisdictions for a better process. Using the British Columbia system as a model, they proposed a pilot project.

The Response

In April 2005, EMC launched an approvals registry pilot project for on-site sewage systems. They tested the model in the two offices which handle the largest volume of on-site applications in the province; Bridgewater and Bedford.

The streamlined system cut approval waiting times by two-thirds, from an average of three weeks to one. This dramatic reduction allowed applicants to start building sooner.

Qualified persons submitted a completed application form. This was accompanied by all appropriate documents and a signed checklist confirming that all relevant regulations and technical guidelines had been followed.

The system's database automatically acknowledged each application and placed it in one of three categories: "no review," "full review" or "detailed review." Exempt applications received immediate approvals. Construction could begin right away, with no costly delays. All exempted systems still received a full final inspection. Projects selected for review received either a full review or a 'desk' review, which was less detailed. The shorter application form and streamlined process allowed inspectors to spend less time reviewing applications – and more time inspecting systems and enforcing environmental protective measures.



The construction industry's response to the pilot project was extremely positive. One person qualified under the new system congratulated the department for "much better turnaround time this year than last year." Many builders advised adopting the new approval system province-wide.

The success of the pilot project led to adoption of the new approach in spring 2007. The department has introduced regulations to create and support a streamlined approval process that is available throughout the province.

How this project improves competitiveness and compliance

Streamlining approvals reduces wait times and saves builders time and money. This, in turn, boosts businesses and creates a more competitive environment for the construction industry.

With this pilot project, the department simplified the approvals process but kept its role as environmental guardian. Inspectors were able to maximize their time inspecting systems that have been installed by qualified individuals – and minimize time spent reviewing long, detailed application forms.

This new system will give inspectors even more time in the field to investigate environmental threats, improving environmental protection.

Where can I get more information about this initiative?

You can call either of these two telephone numbers: 902-424-2547 or toll-free: 1-877-9ENVIRO (1-877- 934-8476). You can also e-mail the Environmental Monitoring and Compliance Division at: emc@gov.ns.ca or contact your local Environment and Labour office.

About the CCI

The on-site sewage disposal system project supports the goals of Environment and Labour's Competitiveness and Compliance Initiative (CCI). The CCI is a key part of *Better Regulation – Everyone's Business*, the Government of Nova Scotia's far-reaching plan for improving regulation in the province.

Environment and Labour is the main regulatory department in Nova Scotia, and is changing the way laws are designed, communicated and enforced in Nova Scotia. Through the CCI, the department is taking a multi-year and systematic approach to making sure that our regulatory programs meet the needs of Nova Scotians. The Competitiveness and Compliance Initiative is working to make a brighter future for our people, economy, environment and communities.

Where can I get more information on the Competitiveness and Compliance Initiative?

Find out more at: www.gov.ns.ca/enla/cci or by calling or 902-424-3081



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