

Regional Onsite (Decentralized) Wastewater Treatment Forums (April 13 & 14, 2005): Moving Toward Successful Decentralized Wastewater Management

The USDA-CSREES Regional Water Coordination Program (a partnership between Cornell, Rutgers and the Universities of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), in collaboration with USEPA (Region 2 and the Office of Wastewater Management in EPA headquarters) and the Orange County Water Authority, hosted an Onsite Wastewater Treatment Forum at Bear Mountain, New York on April 13, 2005. The forum was attended by approximately 100 professionals representing academia, USEPA, state environmental and health agencies, county health departments, municipalities, watershed associations, industry representatives, and interested citizens.

Onsite or decentralized systems - septic tanks, cess pools, leach fields and the like - serve 25% of US homes and are a permanent element of our nation's wastewater infrastructure. Existing state and local programs that regulate decentralized systems are inadequate to ensure proper performance. While the federal government does not regulate decentralized systems, the USDA-CSREES Regional Water Coordination Program (RWCP) and USEPA are working to assist states and local governments to address the potential health and environmental threats associated with failing and inadequate onsite systems. The RWCP convened with USEPA an initial forum in 2003, conducted pilot training for state and local government officials and industry representatives, and has supported local onsite system management demonstration projects. The USEPA has developed numerous guidance documents and other tools to assist and encourage state and local governments to implement proper management programs, and acknowledges the importance of establishing partnerships and providing guidance materials by conducting forums and conferences as an integral part of the solution to effective onsite program management.

A second forum on April 14, 2005 at the USEPA Region 2 offices in New York City was designed to educate USEPA and state agency staff as to the current situation regarding decentralized systems in our region and to encourage greater coordination among USEPA and state programs. USEPA staff gave presentations on a number of subjects including onsite system management in the Peconic Estuary in New York, source water protection, underground injection control, the identification of impaired water bodies, the Water Infrastructure Needs Survey, the nonpoint source grant program and the coastal nonpoint source program.

The RWCP has assisted USEPA Region 2 in preparing an action plan for onsite system management to complement the "Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems Program Strategy" developed by USEPA Headquarters. The Region 2 plan emphasizes partnerships (notably the close working relationship with the RWCP), capacity development, practitioner training and public education. These forums are an important element in our effort to improve onsite system management -- profiling progress, raising issues and identifying needed next steps.