



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



CASE STUDY

Snohomish County Septic System Outreach Pilot Program

As of 2011, over 78,000 septic systems were registered in Snohomish County, Washington, however the number of failing systems was unknown. Studies of streams in multiple Snohomish County, watersheds consistently show the presence of bacteria from human sources. This regular presence indicates that failing septic systems may be a probable source.

The county's Surface Water Management Division launched a septic system outreach pilot program to improve water quality by encouraging septic system owners to adopt a suite of best management practices (BMPs) related to the care and maintenance of septic systems.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Through a Centennial Clean Water Fund grant from the Washington State Department of Ecology, the Surface Water Management Division conducted research in order to select target audiences, solidify realistic program goals and objectives, and identify audience barriers to BMP adoption and motivators for behavior change. Research methods included:

For Septic System Owners:

- Interactive polling,
- Telephone survey, and
- Focus groups.

For Service Providers:

- Questionnaire, and
- Rapid Ethnographic Survey.

From this research, the Surface Water Management Division developed and tested a multi-modal public involvement and septic system education strategy consisting of:

- Direct mail campaigns,
- Landowner workshops,

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

With the ultimate goal of cleaner waterways, the pilot program sought to alter everyday behaviors of septic system owners, including regularly checking drain fields, and encouraging increased mindfulness about what should and should not go down drains and toilets. The effort also educated homeowners on the necessity of regular septic system tank inspection and maintenance.

- Onsite septic system care web pages, and
- "House calls" from Snohomish Health District sanitarians to inspect properties and speak one-on-one with homeowners about their septic systems.

A full report on this pilot program and outreach materials are available at the Septic System Outreach Pilot Program website: www.septicreport.surfacewater.info.

PROMOTION

The county's outreach initiatives were advertised via:

- A direct mail campaign, which notified homeowners of promotional items available at workshops, including drain snakes, drainers, and more.
- Fact sheets and brochures available online and distributed through technical assistance visits, sanitary surveys, and workshops.
- Mailers and doorknob hangers.
- Posters in public spaces and local businesses.
- Postcards.

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- Emailed announcements to key influencers.
- Announcements on the division's website.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The Surface Water Management Division's first challenge regarding its pilot program was identifying key geographic areas to target. This was solved by narrowing down targeted areas to select sub-basins in northern and southern areas of the county, as well as rural and suburban neighborhoods.

Focus group research indicated that homeowners with septic systems had strong negative reactions to scare tactics, such as suggesting homeowners with systems that are 30 years old or older may need to replace their system simply due to its age. To mitigate these negative reactions, the program's messaging utilized a positive tone.

Additional research proved that many homeowners were unsure if they could trust septic system professionals. This was addressed with an ethnographic survey, which increased understanding and explored limitations of the septic industry.

Program managers suggest that some BMPs, such as inspecting septic tanks routinely, may have barriers that are difficult to overcome with education alone.

By integrating an education program with an enforcement program or a service area, such as a septic district, agencies may be able to influence a significant majority of homeowners to adopt these higher-barrier BMPs.

PARTNERSHIPS

The pilot program benefited from a number of different partnerships, including but not limited to:

- A collaboration with the **Snohomish Health District and Department of Ecology** to develop a Snohomish County Septic System Program Public Involvement and Education (PIE) plan.
- An alliance with **Edmonds Community College** to conduct a rapid ethnographic assessment of septic system industry professionals.
- A collaboration with the **Snohomish Health District Septic Issues Committee** to survey operation and maintenance providers.
- A partnership with **Washington Sea Grant**, which provided an engaging workshop speaker.

RESULTS

Overall, participants responded positively to the pilot program, stating that they preferred the effort's "direct, no-nonsense" information versus "scare tactics."

In addition to boosting residential septic system awareness and improved behavioral changes, the program has increased the Surface Water Management Division management's understanding of homeowner attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding septic systems. With this increased understanding, the division has been able to create improved messaging that will better connect with audiences.

The program's success was measured via a direct mail campaign, focus groups, house calls, and post-workshop surveys mailed to participants seven months after the workshops.

Additional information on the results of the pilot program can be found at: www.septicreport.surfacewater.info.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SNOHOMISH COUNTY SEPTIC SYSTEM OUTREACH PILOT PROGRAM

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www.septicreport.surfacewater.info

