



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



CASE STUDY

University of Minnesota Onsite Sewage Treatment Program

Launched in the 1970s, the Onsite Sewage Treatment Program is administered by the University of Minnesota’s Water Resources Center within the College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Sciences.

The program targets both septic system professionals and homeowners. Beyond its popular workshops, the program’s biggest outreach tool is the *Septic System Owners Guide*, a 32-page comprehensive guide to septic systems that covers everything from what septic systems are to how to properly maintain them. Available nationwide, the guide has already sold more than 100,000 copies.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Through a variety of modestly priced training and education sessions, the program provides certification and continuing education training for some 2,000 septic system professionals a year.

Free, two-hour educational workshops are provided for homeowners. Topics covered include the basics of septic systems (including what they are and are not) how they work, proper maintenance, and what should and should not go down drains and toilets.

The workshops include a field trip with a septic professional to evaluate and pump a septic tank, which spurs increased engagement and enables homeowners to discuss best practices in the field.

Attendees each receive a free copy of the *Septic System Owners Guide*, provided through Minnesota Clean Water Legacy grants. Online resources, such as fact sheets, are available for homeowners as well, regardless of attendance.



GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The Onsite Sewage Treatment Program seeks to protect public health and the environment by improving wastewater treatment through research-based education and outreach for homeowners, small communities, professionals and policy-makers.

Homeowner workshops are designed to inform participants about the need to properly maintain their septic systems, from regular pumping to what’s acceptable—and unacceptable—to put down drains and toilets. Proper maintenance ultimately leads to cleaner waterways and groundwater.

County homeowners that attended the workshops are given a permit discount when applying for new septic system installation.

PROMOTION

Advertising tactics for the Onsite Sewage Treatment Program include online advertising, radio ads, and print materials, including fliers and county-customized brochures.

In addition to paid advertising, program managers regularly update the program’s website and procure press coverage, such as radio interviews and local newspaper articles with relevant outreach advertising running alongside news articles.



Workshop participants evaluate a septic system for sludge.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Program funding continues to be challenge and, because of this, workshop frequency as well as staff count have decreased over the years.

Onsite Sewage Treatment Program management recommends that organizations seeking to launch similar programs first get to know their audiences, then plan the curriculum according to their needs and questions.

Providing permit discounts helped overcome the challenge of homeowners who did not want to attend workshops.

Program managers also recommend teaming with industry partners—including regulators at the state and local level, septic professionals in the field, property owners, and state and out-of-state colleges and universities—which both bolsters and expands education efforts.

PARTNERSHIPS

Since septic system requirements differ statewide, partnerships have become an important element of the outreach initiative. As such, partnerships have been established with local counties, including Rice, Chisago, and Douglas counties. These local partners help identify area-specific issues that should be covered in workshops.

In addition, partnering with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency aided in education efforts because, “having those who write the rules and enforcement on a state-wide level reaffirms to participants that the training is accurate.”

RESULTS

Area water quality has improved since launching the education program, and workshops have proven that “people who own septic systems are hungry for information on how to best take care of them,” with participants reporting a plethora of misinformation about septic systems circulating amongst homeowners from various sources.

Visit <http://septic.umn.edu/index.htm> for additional information on the program’s workshops and resources.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
ONSITE SEWAGE TREATMENT PROGRAM:

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ONSITE SEWAGE
TREATMENT PROGRAM

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