



# Media Release

## State Water Board Approves Statewide Septic Systems Policy to Minimize Risks to Water Quality *Local Health Agencies Will Provide Guidance to Property Owners*

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) today approved a statewide policy for the operation and maintenance of septic systems or Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS) to minimize the risks to public health and water quality and recognizes that responsible local agencies can provide the most effective means to manage OWTS on a routine basis.

This policy creates a statewide framework to guide regional water boards and local public health agencies. Standards and enforcement authority will remain with local agencies to ensure existing septic systems don't threaten water bodies already identified as polluted.

Nitrates and pathogens (bacteria) leaking from septic systems pose a risk to human health and to aquatic wildlife. This policy focuses on problem septic systems that are possibly contaminating either groundwater or surface waters that serve the general public. It is anticipated that less than 2 percent of the more than 1.2 million OWTS installed and operating statewide will be subject to the new policy.

"Without the continued emphasis on an implementable solution by various environmental and public health organizations, this policy would not have been approved today," said State Water Board Chair Charles Hoppin. "This policy requires action on septic systems that are known to be polluting nearby waters, while not interfering with property owners who have properly maintained septic systems."

This policy recognizes that responsible local agencies provide the most effective means to manage OWTS on a routine basis and empowers them to do so. This policy does not interfere with that existing oversight. Many parts of the state already have clear rules and guidelines on the maintenance and operation of septic systems in local jurisdictions and counties.

This policy establishes a statewide, risk-based, tiered approach for the regulation and management of OWTS installations and replacements and sets the level of performance and protection expected from OWTS. In particular, the policy requires actions for identified areas with water bodies where it is known that septic systems are contributing to water quality degradation that adversely affects beneficial uses.

C A L I F O R N I A   E N V I R O N M E N T A L   P R O T E C T I O N   A G E N C Y



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The regional and local agencies will have time according to the schedule set by the Policy in which to adopt a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) in regions where it is believed that septic tanks may be contributing to identified, impaired water bodies. What this means is the less than two percent of home and landowners with existing systems who are anticipated to be affected by the policy still have time before action is required.

A TMDL is essentially a plan of action to limit pollutants reaching an impaired water body, in order to return the water body to its full beneficial uses. A TMDL requires a reduction of the various sources of pollution, which may include OWTS. The development of a TMDL is a public process, and those affected by the policy can continue to participate at meetings with regional and local officials.

Assembly Bill 885 (Statutes of 2000, chapter 781), which was approved by the California State Legislature and signed into law in September 2000 and codified as sections 13290-13291.7, chapter 4.5, division 7 of the Water Code, requires the State Water Board to adopt regulations or standards for the permitting and operation of all specified categories of onsite sewage treatment systems in the state and to apply those regulations or standards commencing six months after their adoption.

In compliance with the law, the State Water Board developed the *Water Quality Control Policy for Siting, Design, Operation, and Maintenance of Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems* (Policy) in consultation with other state agencies, specific stakeholder groups, and the general public.

To see the draft resolution the board acted on:

[http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board\\_info/agendas/2012/jun/061912\\_7\\_wdraftres.pdf](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board_info/agendas/2012/jun/061912_7_wdraftres.pdf)

For more information on this policy please visit the OWTS program page at:

[http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water\\_issues/programs/owts/](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/owts/)

The program page has a variety of tools, fact sheets and frequently asked questions on the subject of OWTS. It also features an interactive map for property owners to determine if their property with a septic system is near an impaired water body.

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