

# Green Facts

## Small Private Subsurface Sewage Disposal Systems Approvals Requirements

This fact sheet explains the approval requirements for private small subsurface sewage disposal systems (SSDS, also known as septic systems). Approvals are required for these facilities, under either the Building Code or the *Ontario Water Resources Act* (OWRA), as they discharge contaminants to groundwater. This fact sheet provides information for prospective operators and owners of small systems that dispose of sewage effluent into the ground. Approval requirements for small systems apply throughout the province.

### Small system approvals

“Small” systems are defined as having flows of 10,000 litres or less per day. A small system is located entirely within the boundaries of the single lot it is intended to serve. The single lot should be identified on a legal survey which has been registered on title to the lands. Approvals for “small” systems are granted by municipalities (or the delegated authority) under the *Building Code*. In unorganized parts of the Province, the approval would be given by an authority delegated with this responsibility. That authority could be a township, a local health unit, or a properly licensed and delegated contractor.

### Large system approvals

If the “lot” does not have a survey, and is part of a larger parcel of land on which other septic systems are located or will be located, an approval for a large system will be required, if the total flows exceed 10,000 L/day.

The Environmental Assessment and Approvals Branch (EAAB) of the Ministry of the Environment issues “Certificates of Approval” (Cs of A) under the OWRA for the treatment and disposal of sewage by large subsurface sewage disposal systems (LSSDS), which are characterized by flows of more than 10,000 L/day.

It should be noted that if the septic system is not on the same lot as the building that it serves, or if the system serves a number of lots, the system is considered to be a large system, for which a Certificate of Approval is required from the Ministry of the Environment.

A number of small systems on a campground would also qualify as a large system if their total design flows exceed 10,000 L/day. In addition, if there are a number of residences or cottages occupying one large lot (i.e., all existing within the survey boundaries for the large lot) and each is serviced by an individual septic system (or all are serviced by one or more communal systems), this would constitute a ‘large’ system if the combined daily flows of all the individual systems exceed 10,000 litres per day. Approval, therefore, would be required from the Ministry for a large system.

### Organized versus unorganized (unincorporated) parts of Ontario

Most of southern Ontario has been organized into municipalities with their own municipal governments, official plans and zoning by-laws. These municipalities administer the *Building Code*. In Northern Ontario and parts of Eastern Ontario, there are areas that are not organized into municipalities.

These parts of Ontario are generally known as unorganized (unincorporated) areas.

Much of this land base is Crown land, under the jurisdiction of the Province. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), on behalf of the Crown, may sell or lease parcels (or lots) of Crown land for various purposes. These parcels should be clearly defined by legal surveys. These parcels of land are subject to the same controls as lots in a subdivision created under the *Planning Act* in organized areas. Property taxes, lake setbacks, properly constructed wells, and properly constructed and licensed septic systems are examples of the controls that apply to all such lots. Installation of wells and septic systems must be undertaken carefully by licensed individuals to ensure there will be no cross-contamination between the septic systems and wells, no adverse effects on surface water, and no adverse effects on ground water beyond the lot's surveyed boundaries. Septic systems and wells must be installed in accordance with the requirements of the provincial regulations that govern them.

In addition, there are lands owned by some conservation authorities and other non-government organisations (NGOs), which they lease to cottagers. The lease agreements contain specific requirements to be met by the lease holders, including provisions for septic systems and wells.

### **How do I obtain a septic system approval?**

Information on approvals for small septic systems can be obtained from municipal building departments, or their equivalents in unorganized (unincorporated) parts of the Province. Septic system approval information may be available in Government Information Centres and MNR District Offices.

Two helpful companion documents for use in establishing wells and septic systems are available on the ministry's web site ([www.ene.gov.on.ca](http://www.ene.gov.on.ca)) under Publications: Manuals and Guidelines. They are: *Guideline D-5-4, Individual On-Site Sewage Systems: Water Quality Impact Risk Assessment*, and *D-5-5, Private Wells: Water Supply Assessment*. These documents were developed by the Ministry of the Environment to assist municipalities and developers in their land use planning and servicing decisions. Hydrogeology studies, as discussed in these documents and carried out by a qualified

professional, will ensure that lot sizes are sufficiently large to provide on and off-site protection. A rule of thumb is that lots 0.8 hectares (ha) or 2 acres (A.) in size are large enough to minimise potential for cross-contamination of wells by septic systems and minimise potential for off-site adverse effects to groundwater and surface water.

### **What should I do before I apply for an approval?**

Start planning your project early. Depending on circumstances, it may take several months to obtain approval. Pre-application consultation should be undertaken with local township offices, their equivalent approving body, or the Ministry of Natural Resources to find out the requirements for obtaining a property for lease or purchase, and for installing septic systems and wells. Lease agreements from a Conservation Authority or other non-government organisation may provide instructions regarding septic systems and wells. If surface water is to be the source of potable supplies (i.e., drinking water), filtration and disinfection may be necessary. The local health unit should be able to provide the required information.

At the time of filing applications, the approving body should be able to advise how long it will take to process your application.

*The information contained in this document is of a general nature only and is not intended to constitute advice for any specific situation. Please note that the texts of many Ontario statutes and regulations are available on the Internet at [www.e-laws.gov.on.ca](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca).*

*For more information about approvals for septic systems, please contact the local health unit, township office, or delegated authority.*

Ministry of the Environment  
Environmental Assessment and Approvals Branch  
2 St. Clair Ave W, Floor 12A  
Toronto, ON M4V 1L5

Toll Free: 1-800-461-6290  
Phone: 416-314-8001 Fax: 416-314-8452  
Email: [EAABGen@ene.gov.on.ca](mailto:EAABGen@ene.gov.on.ca)  
Website: [www.ene.gov.on.ca](http://www.ene.gov.on.ca)

*For information on Crown land and septic systems, contact the MNR office closest to the property. MNR offices and contact numbers are available from the MNR website: [www.mnr.gov.on.ca](http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca)*