

One for All?

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Would onsite wastewater system installers appreciate a well-deserved recognition of their unique knowledge and skills? Would installers welcome taking responsibility for completing their own installations with little or no regulatory inspection? Shouldn't the person who balances theory (a "plan") with reality (a working onsite system) get the credit they deserve? Couldn't an installer's demonstrated competence be accepted from county to county, or even from one state to another?

Well, some of these possibilities may be a bit out of reach for now, but a good first step is already underway. The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has begun a project to establish a national credential for onsite wastewater system installers. The effort is being funded by a cooperative agreement from USEPA, and is viewed as an integral step in advancing the national goals set by the *Voluntary Guidelines for Management of Onsite and Clustered (Decentralized) Wastewater Treatment Systems* (the Guidelines). NEHA has been selected for this project based upon its successful history of developing, implementing and maintaining professional credentials, including the familiar Registered Sanitarian/ Registered Environmental Health Specialist and among several others.

A credential is the end product of a process (training and examination) intended to evaluate a practitioner's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's), specifically in this case, the KSA's necessary to "install" a range of onsite wastewater systems. The development of any credential requires validation, a series of steps to assure that the subject matter is properly identified and that the credential exam measures those KSA's that our stakeholders have identified as being most critical for competent onsite wastewater system installers. What the exam intends to measure. NEHA's role in this particular process is to facilitate this validation process, and NOT to decide what should or should not be on an exam for onsite wastewater installers. Who will decide what subject matter should be addressed to evaluate an installer's knowledge, skills and abilities?

- INSTALLERS, first and foremost, will determine how to define and measure competence, which activities are most significant, and even what qualifications are required to take a credentialing examination. The National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA) has recruited a representative group of installers to represent the stakeholders. NEHA will maintain an ongoing cooperative relationship with NOWRA through out the development and implementation phase of this credentialing project.
- TRAINERS of onsite practitioners are incorporated into the credentialing process because of their experience in identifying and communicating critical subject matter over the years. National onsite training centers and the Consortium of Institutes for Decentralized Wastewater Treatment (CIDWT) have provided stakeholder representatives for this valuable viewpoint.
- The State Onsite Regulators Alliance (SORA) has taken an interest in the project, and provided representatives to the stakeholder group. At some point, the real

value of an onsite wastewater system installer credential may best be demonstrated by how it is recognized in State codes.

- The National Environmental Services Center (NESC) has committed to facilitate a communications network between the SORA members and the credential development process.

The stakeholder group has already conducted one meeting, and a wide range of knowledge, skills and abilities have been considered. One key set of questions was whether the credential will be intended to measure “entry level” or “advanced” installer competence, and what would make an installer eligible (i.e. training, experience, how much, etc.) to take the examination.

There was considerable agreement among the group that NEHA should develop both an entry-level and an advanced credential, and subsequent discussions with USEPA appear to have made this direction possible. Multiple “levels” of this credential is consistent with the direction some codes have taken, is consistent with the recommendations of NOWRA’s Model Code committee, and will likely make eligibility issues easier to define.

How will holding a professional credential benefit onsite wastewater system installers? Our installer stakeholders had a clear message for the group; acknowledge the professional satisfaction of successfully overcoming the personal challenge, but make the credential a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Installing onsite wastewater systems is, after all, a competitive business. This credential will better serve the industry by helping to assure professionalism and competence among installers. Additionally, it will benefit consumers by creating a market where the public can hire installers that have professional knowledge and skills that are demonstrated by virtue of their holding this credential.

With this goal set by the installer stakeholders, NEHA is moving forward to identify and rank “core competencies” by surveying a wide range of installers, is reviewing potential membership for a committee of “subject matter experts”, and is promoting this effort in order to gather even more input. The target date for implementation is mid-2006, and your comments are both welcome and encouraged. The final product is intended to be a credible tool for installers, created with installers as the major stakeholders. Comments and questions may be routed through NOWRA, through your state NOWRA affiliate, or directly to NEHA. NEHA’s project coordinator is Christl Pokorney at (303) 756-9090 X 305, or email cpokorney@neha.org.

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