

## **Pumper Interview: What's In Initials?**

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Doctors have their M.D. Accountants have their CPA. Engineers have their P.E. What if onsite wastewater treatment professionals had initials to put after their names? That is, what if onsite practitioners could earn a uniform national credential?

That day may come sooner than you think, starting with onsite system installers. The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), based in Denver, Colo., is now leading an effort to create a national credential for installers that would be available as early as 2006. The program is being funded by a grant from the U.S. EPA.

Coordinating the effort is Tony Smithson, RS, individual sewage disposal program coordinator for Lake County (Ill.) Environmental Health Services, and for the past six years also NEHA's Onsite Wastewater Section Chair. Smithson talked about credentialing for onsite professionals in a *Pumper* Interview.

### ***Pumper*: Where is the impetus for onsite credentials coming from?**

**Smithson:** The U.S. EPA, in its *Voluntary Guidelines* for onsite systems, expresses a preference for more consistency and uniformity nationwide in all aspects of managing onsite systems. The EPA would also like to elevate the level of professionalism in all practitioner categories.

If you look at the management guidelines where they break out designers, installers, service providers, regulators and inspectors, in each of those categories there's a recommendation for certification. Installer certification happens to be the first one that EPA decided to pursue.

### ***Pumper*: Why is it beneficial to have a uniform credential for installers?**

**Smithson:** It is beneficial on three levels. First, there is a group of people in any vocation who will seek a credential for their own personal satisfaction, and I'm sure that is true among onsite installers.

Second, we would hope that in addition there could be some competitive advantage in the marketplace for having the credential, as it would be recognized by the public as a demonstration of competence.

Third, ultimately we hope the credential would be incorporated into state or local licensing, at which point it would really set credentialed installers apart from others. That would be a decision for state and local regulators to make, but it certainly is the case, for example, with the Registered Sanitarian (RS) credential. In a lot of states, if you're going to practice environmental health, you've got to have that credential. I think it would benefit installers and the states to look at how an installer credential could be incorporated into their codes.

### ***Pumper*: Among all of the many related industry associations, why should NEHA handle this credential?**

**Smithson:** NEHA has two distinct functions. One is as a professional organization of about 5,000 environmental health practitioners. The other is as a credentialing organization. Credentialing is a major part of the NEHA business. They now administer seven professional credentials, including Registered Sanitarian and Registered Environmental Health Specialist (REHS). This experience is what set NEHA

apart from other groups that were interested in developing certification programs for onsite wastewater treatment professionals.

***Pumper:* How does NEHA know what should be the qualifications of a credentialed onsite installer?**

**Smithson:** We are letting the installers tell us that. The last thing we want is for this credential to be viewed as something that regulators think installers ought to know. We are going the extra mile to make sure this credential is credible to people who actually do installations. NEHA's ultimate goal is to pull installers into the process of creating the credential and make sure they have the final say in what this ends up being.

***Pumper:* How are you going about getting input from installers?**

**Smithson:** First, we created a 15-member stakeholder group to guide the process, and it includes heavy representation from installers, as well as regulators, trainers and others with experience related to installation. The stakeholder group met for the first time last June at NEHA in Denver.

Second, based on discussions at the stakeholder meeting, NEHA created a survey. We plan to survey a substantial number of installers. We'll ask them to look at all the tasks our stakeholder group said were part of an installation and determine, from their own experience, how important each task is, how often they have to deal with it, and exactly who performs each task – whether it be the owner of the company, a lead worker or foreman, or a laborer.

When the surveys are returned, we'll assess all the answers and zero in on exactly what the heart of the installation process is, according to installers. We have the survey developed, and over the next few months we'll be asking installers to complete it. It's important for us to get a good cross section from around the country. We would hope to get several hundred surveys back. It is not a simple survey and it will require a little bit of time and thought from those who take it.

***Pumper:* Why have a national credential when a number of states already have certification programs of their own?**

**Smithson:** From the EPA standpoint, they observe that a number of states don't have certification programs that are comprehensive. Furthermore, our experience tells us that states struggle with things like licensing, testing, and administration for such programs. In addition, I find that many state licensing programs focus on particular components of state or local codes, rather than on the basic practice of installing onsite wastewater systems. We do not envision creating a credential that focuses on code requirements for any particular location.

***Pumper:* How exactly will the credential be structured? Will it be tailored to different levels of experience or competence among installers?**

**Smithson:** One of the key issues remaining after our stakeholder group meeting was whether to make it an entry-level credential that anybody installing onsite systems should have, or a more advanced credential for complex work. The stakeholder group strongly recommended a two-level credential – one for entry-level practitioner and another for experienced practitioners who deal with complex technologies. There was such a strong feeling in favor of at least two levels that NEHA has committed to try and make that happen.

***Pumper:* How will it be decided exactly which skills an installer must have to earn the credential:**

**Smithson:** The stakeholder group broke the practice of installing onsite systems into three domains in which competence is necessary. The first is plan assessment, in which the installer receives a system plan and assesses what activities and what materials will be needed to get ready to install the system. The second domain is job staging, which has to do with setting elevations on the site and coordinating with subcontractors and homeowners. The third domain is the development of the site and the actual installation.

**Pumper: Once the necessary competencies are finally identified, how will installers actually be tested?**

**Smithson:** The process will include an examination, and generally speaking, NEHA exams are fairly difficult. To create the exam, we will convene a group of subject matter experts to write questions based on what our survey says the exam should address. Then NEHA will contract with a professional testing organization to validate the questions and make sure the exam is fair and credible. The exam will be tested in the field with installers, and if it works out as it should have, it will be ready to administer.

A professional who completes the exam successfully will get a nice certificate and will be a certified onsite wastewater installer. Typically, NEHA credentials are good for two years, during which there is a requirement for continuing education (CE). After the two years, upon proof that the CE requirement is met, the certification is renewed.

**Pumper: How much does certification cost?**

**Smithson:** That has not been decided yet. However, typically, there is a fee for the initial examination and a fee for renewal. By way of example, for the Registered Environmental Health Specialist (REHS) credential, there is an application fee of \$35 for NEHA members [\$60 for non-members]; and an exam fee of \$95 for members [\$175 for non-members]. The renewal fee is \$90 for members [\$170 for non-members].

**Pumper: What kind of training will be available to help installers prepare for the exam?**

**Smithson:** Part of the EPA grant for developing the credential has to do with developing a curriculum for a review course. We're working closely with NOWRA and the Consortium of Institutes for Decentralized Wastewater Treatment. Those two groups are looking at a more comprehensive train program for installers.

**Pumper: How can installers learn more about the new credential?**

**Smithson:** They can contact the project manager at NEHA, Christl Pokorney, 303/756-9090, Extension 305; cpokorney@neha.org. Installers are welcome to take our survey and provide their input on what the credential should cover.

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