

SB830: Environmental Health Specialists and On-Site Sewage Disposal Systems - Reform (Environmental Health Systems Support Act of 2023)

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

February 23, 2023

Position: Favorable

Permit Tracking System

Our understanding is that one of the problems that applicants are having with permitting septic systems is that once the permitting process has initiated, it is a black box of information - they may or may not know where the system is in the process, creating uncertainty.

We enthusiastically support the concept of a database to track septic permits as they make their way through the process and think this could be a good building block for ultimately having a more uniform and user friendly database for septic systems.

Current septic records vary widely across counties, as some have moved to digital records while others are still on paper. Many other states have statewide, uniform septic databases which would be good models for Maryland. For example, [Florida has a replicable database that should be explored](#).

If the Maryland Department of the Environment is creating a new, online tracking system, then we would want it to be useful outside tracking permitting, and to endure so the state and counties have database of where septic systems exist in the state - enabling targeted education and a more complete understanding of where septic systems are in the state. To this end, we suggest that the legislature establish a permanent database.

Increase Staffing

MDE needs more staff to effectively manage the onsite wastewater program and support the environmental health officers. We have heard complaints from homeowners, industry members, and others about long wait times to permit new or failing systems. Employees are asked to do too much with too little, and increasing the number of staff will help spread the load.

Loan forgiveness

In our work around this space, we have also heard stories about how difficult it is to recruit and retain environmental health officers. Loan forgiveness could be an impactful incentive to entice new graduates to spend some time working at local health departments.

Study on staffing needs

Ultimately, the state needs to address the growing problem of too few environmental health specialists. SB830 sets up a study to address the intertwined problems of recruitment, retention, wages, and an apprenticeship to develop a pipeline to get new employees into the field.

Study on delegation of authority

Maryland uses a concept of delegated authority to run its septic permitting system, which has some benefits and some drawbacks. While we do agree that this study is important, we do worry that the University of Maryland Agricultural and Food Systems Program may not have adequate staff or expertise to make recommendations on organizational structures. This study may benefit from a larger workgroup or at the very least drawing expertise from other Maryland universities' business and management programs.

Thank you,

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