



Briefing note

December 2015

Regulating small domestic sewage discharges to ground in source protection zone 1 (SPZ1) in England

As part of our commitment to improve water quality and reduce pollution, we are improving the protection of local drinking water supplies (such as wells, springs or boreholes) from septic tank and small sewage treatment plant discharges.

We are contacting people who own or operate a septic tank or small sewage treatment plant in an area nearest to a groundwater drinking water supply. We believe they are likely to need an environmental permit for their discharge. Permitting helps us properly monitor discharges to ground.

Overview

In January 2015, we introduced new rules for operating septic tanks and sewage treatment plants. These 'general binding rules' simplify the way septic tanks and small sewage treatment plants (also known as package treatment plants) are regulated in England. In sensitive areas additional conditions to protect the environment may be applied through environmental permits.

As well as complying with the new general binding rules that have been introduced, we are asking households and businesses with septic tanks or small sewage treatment plants to apply to us for a permit if they are also located in an area nearest to a groundwater drinking water supply (known as a groundwater source protection zone 1 or SPZ1).

Who does this affect?

Starting in January 2016, we will be contacting relevant households and businesses who we believe are not connected to the mains sewerage system *and* in an SPZ1 to advise them they are likely to need a permit for their septic tank or treatment plant if they discharge effluent to the ground. We are initially asking them to provide further information, either over the phone or by completing a form and returning it to us in the post. We will then guide them through the permit application process, ensuring it is done as quickly and simply as possible.

The permit for a small sewage discharge costs £125 and is a one-off charge.

We have assessed information provided to us by the water companies to help us identify the correct properties but, because we had to make some assumptions with the data we received, we may write to some owners of properties that are connected to the mains sewer or have a sealed cess pit, who do not need a permit. In these cases we will ask people to complete and return their response form so we can update our records.

Why are we asking for permits?

Improving water quality is part of the wider improvements we are making through river basin management plans. As part of this, we are taking a more risk-based approach to discharges to groundwater. Anything

that gets into the groundwater in a SPZ1 may get into the drinking water, but by issuing permits in these areas we can ensure systems are properly risk-assessed, maintained and are not causing a risk to public health or the environment.

What exactly is an SPZ1?

The areas nearest to where drinking water (either public or private water supply) is abstracted from groundwater are known as source protection zone 1s (SPZ1s).

Some groundwater SPZ1s are larger than others due to the geology of the area and the way in which the groundwater flows. For example, the South Downs and some parts of the Cotswolds have very large groundwater SPZ1s due to porous rocks such as chalk and limestone.

Who needs a permit?

Only households and businesses located in an SPZ1 discharging effluent to ground need a permit.

Permits set out what people need to do regularly to ensure their system continues to operate safely and prevent pollution. However, everyone with a septic tank or small sewage treatment plant needs to meet the requirements in the general binding rules.

If a system is already permitted, the operator needs to continue to comply with the conditions.

For further information go to www.gov.uk/small-sewage-rules or speak to your local contact at the Environment Agency's Area office.

The role of the Environment Agency

The Environment Agency is encouraging people to protect their local environment and comply with the new rules by providing advice and guidance on how to maintain septic tanks and sewage treatment plants correctly, and guiding them through the permit application process.

We are explaining to households that we contact, that the permit will help them play their part in protecting the drinking water supply they and their neighbours, friends and families rely on. There will be occasions where this approach does not work and enforcement action may be necessary.

We have already published a leaflet, online guidance and other materials to inform people about the general binding rules, which you have been kindly helping us to distribute. The permitting requirement affects relatively few households and businesses, and we will engage directly with them so that they are able to easily apply for permits where required.

Anyone worried that a septic tank or sewage treatment plant is causing pollution should call the Environment Agency's incident hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

Further information

Email: enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Telephone: 03708 506 506 (Mon-Fri 8am to 6pm)

Online: www.gov.uk/small-sewage-rules

Write to: Environment Agency National Customer Contact Centre, Quadrant 2, 99 Parkway Avenue, Sheffield S9 4WF

customer service line
03708 506 506

incident hotline
0800 80 70 60

floodline
0345 988 1188
0845 988 1188

www.gov.uk/environment-agency