

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

SEPTIC REGULATIONS

&

THE MONTE RIO/VILLA GRANDE WASTEWATER SOLUTIONS PILOT PROJECT

1) Why are we talking about wastewater projects for the Monte Rio/Villa Grande (MR/VG) area again?

Local government entities have collectively launched a project to explore community wastewater solutions and hired a consultant who is studying the feasible alternatives for the MR/VG area. This project responds to the anticipated changes to septic system requirements, which are intended to protect water quality and public health, and which will affect many properties in the Russian River watershed, including most, if not all, of the MR/VG area.

2) Which septic regulations are important to know about?

The most notable septic regulations respecting the Russian River Watershed, are:

- Action Plan for the Russian River Watershed Pathogen Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL Action Plan): Often referred to as the TMDL, this plan will implement standards and require actions to reduce pathogens (e.g. bacteria, viruses) in the Russian River. It will include new septic system requirements, and is expected to become effective in 2024.
- OWTS Policy: This statewide policy broadly regulates Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS), commonly known as septic systems.
- OWTS Manual: This county manual, which must comply with the OWTS Policy and the TMDL Action Plan, provides the regulatory requirements, policy, and procedural and technical details to implement the OWTS Policy in Sonoma County.
- Local Agency Management Program (LAMP): The LAMP is an application for state approval to allow alternative local standards. The County's LAMP will not be a regulation but will contain an overview of County regulations, such as those in the OWTS Manual, and will demonstrate compliance with the state OWTS Policy.

3) Will the new septic system requirements apply uniformly to all areas in the Russian River watershed?

No. The State identified segments of the Russian River as not meeting water quality standards for pathogens and identified areas of land associated with these segments as areas of concern. The new septic requirements will apply differently to properties in these areas of concern.

4) How can I determine if my property will be affected by these new septic requirements?

Simply search by your property address in the top right search bar of the interactive map located at: <https://bit.ly/Waterboards-APMP-Map>. Properties that are shaded/outlined in yellow will be affected by the new requirements. You can also contact the County's Clean Water Ombudsman for assistance.

5) If my property is in the Russian River watershed's area of concern, how will this affect me and my existing septic system?

After the new state regulations are approved, new requirements will apply, such as an initial reporting of system information, ongoing 5-yr operational inspections, and system upgrades if your system is deficient and the replacement system would be located close to the Russian River or its feeder streams.

6) How long will I have to update my system or connect to a community project?

Most likely 15-20 years from the effective date of the new regulations. Up to 15 years if your septic system or cesspool is functioning, and 20 if you also plan to connect to a community wastewater system that is under development. The state and county encourage early efforts to ensure adequate time for planning and implementation, especially for community projects.

7) When will the new septic regulations become effective?

Probably in 2024. The new and changing State and County regulations are either under development or awaiting full approval, but are expected to take effect in 2024.

8) If my septic system is failing and in need of immediate attention, will I still have the 15 to 20-year timeframe to perform all required upgrades?

Quick Answer: Depends on the circumstances.

Further Explanation: Failing systems causing an immediate threat to public health require immediate action. If immediate action does not require a county permit, then the 15 to 20-year timeframe should apply. However, if immediate action requires a county permit, then all required upgrades may be needed after the new septic regulations become effective. To help reduce the burden and encourage community projects, the county is developing interim solutions. This will require state approval and some level of repair and/or upgrade to your system, but would aim to otherwise retain the 15 to 20-year timeline.

9) My system does not have a septic tank, will I still have the 15 to 20-year timeframe to upgrade my system?

Quick Answer: Depends on the circumstances.

Further Explanation: If your system is not actively failing, or if immediate repairs do not require a county permit, then the timeframe should not change. However, because county permits are not available for systems without a septic tank, all work that requires a county permit will require system upgrades. To help reduce the burdens caused by a failing system and encourage community projects, the county is developing interim solutions. This will require state approval and some level of repair and/or upgrade to your system, but would aim to otherwise retain the 15 to 20-year timeline.

10) If I need to repair, replace or upgrade my system, will my house immediately get "red-tagged" upon discovery?

Quick Answer: No.

Further Explanation: After the new requirements are effective, the Regional Water Quality Control Board will likely require a once-every-five-years operational inspection. If the inspection shows that your system needs repair, replacement, or upgrade, but is not actively failing or considered an immediate threat to public health, you may be notified of required next steps but not immediately "red-tagged."

11) Will I lose my property if I can't comply with the septic regulations?

The county and state understand that site-specific constraints and financial limitations may cause difficulty, but neither intend for the new regulations to result in property loss. To help find a practicable solution for everyone, they are actively working together, with advice from the Lower Russian River Wastewater Citizens Advisory Group, to develop solutions to address

the hardest situations, including those that involve financial barriers to compliance. The county has also hired an Ombudsman to provide support.

12) What if it is impossible to meet the technical requirements of the new regulations, for example, if I cannot meet all setbacks?

The county and state are actively working together, with advice from the Lower Russian River Wastewater Citizens Advisory Group, to develop alternative solutions to help address such site-specific factors.

13) What if I can't afford to make the required improvements to my septic system?

The county is looking for pathways for people to obtain financial assistance, and the county and state are actively working together to develop alternative solutions to help address financial hardship when funding assistance is not available.

14) How much will it cost to upgrade or replace my current septic system?

The costs will be site specific and vary greatly depending on circumstances. Please contact a septic system contractor for an estimate. Some factors affecting cost include the type and condition of your current system, the extent of necessary work and site-specific limitations such as slope, soil type and water table level.

15) What financial assistance will be available to help repair, replace or upgrade septic systems?

Quick Answer: It will depend on circumstances.

Further Explanation: Some funding sources are ready for application, but you must qualify, such as with the Section 504 Home Repair Program that provides loans and grants. The county has hired a Grants Specialist and a Clean Water Ombudsman who are actively seeking to identify and develop other financial assistance opportunities to help with both individual and community projects.

16) What projects are helping to develop a better understanding about how to address wastewater and septic system difficulties in the Lower Russian River?

A few notable projects include:

- [Monte Rio/Villa Grande Pilot Project](#): This includes the ongoing community wastewater feasibility study. For more information, please see the handout about this project.
- [OWTS Mapping Study & Analysis](#): This county-led project is developing an interactive mapping tool and report to better understand septic systems in the county and their related challenges and opportunities.
- [Russian River Pathogen Reduction Planning Project](#): Starting in 2024, this county-led project will develop and prioritize potential projects to address various sources of pathogen pollution in the Russian River, including septic systems, with the intention of pursuing further grant money to support project implementation.
- [West County Water Quality and Recycled Water Supply Feasibility Project](#): This Sonoma Water-led project will evaluate potential regional wastewater infrastructure projects, and will consider community support for such projects.

17) Where can I obtain more information or assistance?

- For all general questions or concerns, including property-specific questions and general assistance, contact the Clean Water Ombudsman by phone (707-565-3747) or by email (Michael.Makdisi@Sonoma-County.org).
- For information about the MR/VG Pilot Project, the Lower Russian River Wastewater Citizen's Advisory Group (CAG), or how to attend one of the CAG's monthly meetings, visit: sonomacounty.ca.gov/lrr-wastewater-cag.
- For information about the MR/VG wastewater feasibility study, contact Steve Koldis at Sonoma Water by phone (707-547-1914) or email (Steve.Koldis@scwa.ca.gov).
- For information or assistance regarding septic permitting and related requirements, visit Permit Sonoma's website at: permitsonoma.org.
- For information or assistance regarding the TMDL Action Plan and related requirements, visit the Regional Water Quality Control Board's website at: bit.ly/NCRWQB-rr-tmdl.