



P R E S S R E L E A S E

COUNTY OF SONOMA

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Sonoma County Implements New, Simpler Process for Septic System Permits

SANTA ROSA, Calif. – At its meeting today (7/14), the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved changes to two county policies dealing with septic systems during the process of remodeling or building an addition onto a structure. The new guidelines, proposed by the Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD), are designed to be much simpler than the former ones, and should make the process easier for everyone involved.

The county's *Guidelines for Remodeling and Additions with Respect to Septic Systems*, more commonly known as the "Remodel Policy," have been in effect since 1992. The guidelines were initially adopted because remodeling and additions to structures can increase the burden on existing septic systems. Therefore, systems may need to be updated at the time of the remodeling or addition. The former guidelines required the use of a complicated formula involving the percentage of altered linear wall footage, combined with the percentage of new habitable square footage involved in the project. This method was difficult and frustrating, and often called for a septic upgrade that was impossible due to property constraints, thus limiting the scope of the building project.

Under the new guidelines, remodel and addition work will be divided into major and minor categories. In all cases, an evaluation of the system will be performed by PRMD staff or a qualified professional. Major projects, which involve replacement of 50% or more of the

(more)

exterior walls, will require the “best available system” based on the scope of the project and site constraints. Minor projects, like small additions or interior remodeling of existing structures will only require confirmation of an existing, properly functioning septic system. There may be situations, such as severely constrained sites or setback problems, which could lead to a “best available system” requirement for smaller projects.

“Septic systems are not a ‘one size fits all’ proposition,” said PRMD Director Pete Parkinson. “Even the old formula driven system, which tried to address that fact, often yielded results that were unworkable,” he said. “We want to ensure that an appropriate and effective system is present, one that takes into account all of the variables of the structure and the site.”

The Board’s action today approved the new guidelines and amended the companion Approval Criteria for Issuance of Septic System Repair Permits. The new guidelines are expected to speed up the permitting process, in many cases making them available “over the counter.” Users should also find the process easier to understand and navigate. Before being proposed to the Board, these guidelines were reviewed and recommended by the Land Use Advisory Panel, which consists of stakeholders from the real estate, contracting, engineering, and septic system industries.

The County of Sonoma is comprised of 26 departments and agencies that provide a full range of services to the community. It encompasses over 1600 square miles and is home to more than 475,000 residents. Sonoma County government has a history of providing excellent and responsive public service while operating under sound fiscal principles.

Located less than one hour north of San Francisco, Sonoma County combines in one location the beautiful Pacific coastline, award-winning wineries, majestic redwoods, historic towns, fine dining, and a wide variety of entertainment and cultural activities.

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Guidelines for Remodeling and Additions with Respect to On-Site Wastewater Treatment Systems

PURPOSE

The Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD) Well and Septic Division strives to provide the highest level of protection of public health and the environment, while at the same time accommodating the public's needs and desires to modify existing structures served by On-Site Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS, commonly referred to as septic systems). The primary objective is to ensure that wastewater is treated properly to protect the health of the public. Protecting public health also preserves our environment and the area in which we live. Although all new residential and commercial projects are required to meet current regulatory OWTS requirements, there is also a need to evaluate and, as appropriate, improve existing residential and commercial septic systems whenever significant remodeling, additions, and/or change of use is proposed.

Sonoma County Code Section 7-5 recognizes that alteration or modification of an existing structure "...such as, but not limited to, the addition of rooms or the modification of floor plans for potential additional occupancy" may impose additional burdens upon an existing septic system "...in excess of its capacity to absorb sewage effluent." Therefore, significant improvements to existing residential and/or commercial structures may require an improvement to the existing septic system as well. The previous policy involved combinations of the calculated percentage of remodel improvements (Lineal Footage of Altered Walls Method) plus the percentage of new square footage (habitable area) to determine septic system requirements. The previous policy failed to produce the desired outcome of fair, consistent, efficient and easily understandable guidelines to determine when a septic system upgrade is appropriate for a remodel improvement. This new policy is meant to provide uniform, consistent, less onerous and easier to understand guidelines for PRMD staff and the public to follow when considering remodels, rebuilds, additions or changes in use to structures.

GENERAL

This policy supercedes and replaces PRMD policies 9-2-12 *Guidelines for Remodeling and Additions with Respect to Septic Systems* (effective date 07/01/06) and 9-2-29 *Percentage of Remodel Improvement Determination* (effective date 06/28/07).

AUTHORITY

- Sonoma County Code, Chapter 7, Section 5
- California Building Code
- California Plumbing Code

- PRMD Policy 9-2-15, *Policy for Reutilization of Existing Onsite Sewage Disposal Systems*

DEFINITIONS

For purposes of interpretation and implementation of this policy, the following definitions shall apply:

"A-BLD" means a remodel project that does not require construction plans and plan review and which can include alteration of up to 40 linear feet of bearing or non-bearing walls, but which does not include relocation of walls (bearing or non-bearing) or additional square footage. Refer to PRMD Policy and Procedure 4-0-7 *A-BLD Permits* for further information.

"Addition" means an increase in habitable space square footage to the residential dwelling or commercial structure and/or any and all ancillary structure(s) either through an expansion of the footprint of the dwelling(s) or structure(s), a second floor addition, a basement addition or the conversion of non-habitable space to habitable use.

"Advanced Treatment Measure" means an approved measure that utilizes special designs and/or additional technology to treat the effluent to a much higher level than a conventional system. An approved Advanced Treatment Measure shall reduce BOD and Suspended Solids to less than 10 mg/l and provide at least 50% nitrogen removal, as verified by an approved independent testing laboratory. Advanced Treatment Measures may be required to address a critical factor of concern, as specified in PRMD Policy Number 9-2-13 *Approval Criteria for Issuance of Septic System Repair Permits* (e.g. setbacks to sensitive receptors, depth to groundwater and/or soil conditions).

"Bedroom" means any space in a conditioned area of a dwelling unit or accessory structure which is 70 square feet and greater in size and which is located along an exterior wall, but not including the following: hall, bathroom, kitchen, living room (maximum of one per dwelling unit), family room (maximum of one per dwelling unit), laundry room, closet/dressing room opening off of a bedroom. Refer to PRMD Policy and Procedure Number 1-4-1 *Definition of Bedroom* for further information.

"B-BLD" means a building permit for new additions, remodeling and/or new buildings that requires construction plans and plan review. A B-BLD is any building permit that does not meet the definition of an A-BLD permit.

"Cesspool" means an excavation in the ground designed to retain the organic matter and solids while allowing the liquids to seep through the bottom and sides.

"Class I OWTS" means the best available system, as determined by PRMD, based upon the specific site conditions and constraints of a particular parcel that serves an existing structure, when a code compliant OWTS is not possible. A Class I system can be either a new (replacement) system with a waiver and may include incorporation of an approved advanced treatment measure, or an existing system with a valid permit on record and meeting all current standards for sewage disposal, with waiver, under the Reutilization Policy. Sufficient area of 100% expansion must exist, which meets the same minimum requirements as the proposed primary system.

"Class III OWTS" means a system that is functioning properly with a concrete or fiberglass septic tank and some leaching field or seepage pits. The system may be undersized or not in compliance with setbacks for code compliant systems. However, a Class III system must comply with the minimum setback requirements, as specified in the *Approval Criteria for Issuance of Septic System Repair Permits* (PRMD Policy Number 9-2-13). Reserve area may be limited. There may be no records on file at PRMD.

"Code Compliant OWTS" means a system that meets all current State and County OWTS standards and requirements. Code Compliant systems include OWTS with waivers issued to allow new construction on vacant lots.

"Existing" means a structure that has been in recent and continuous service. Any structure not in use for twenty-four (24) consecutive months must meet the standards for a new on-site wastewater treatment system that would apply to a vacant lot. Proof of recent and continuous service means providing pertinent documentation that substantiates the use of the property during the period in question. These documents may include, but are not limited to receipts (e.g. PG&E, garbage, water), business records, County or State licenses and permits, deeds, notarized affidavits and dated photographs.

"Field Clearance" means a site visit required when PRMD's file information is not sufficient to show that the proposed work will not adversely impact the septic system. A field clearance is more often needed when an older septic system predates PRMD's record keeping system. In addition, when there is a lack of information on file for the septic system, a site visit is necessary to verify that an approved septic system exists on the property.

"Findings Report" means an analysis of the OWTS which includes review of PRMD septic file information and a visual inspection of an existing OWTS and/or well for the purpose of providing potential buyers or interested parties with information regarding a particular septic system or well. A Findings Report may be prepared by PRMD staff, an RCE or REHS.

"Habitable Space" means habitable or occupied space as defined by the 2007 California Building Code (CBC). CBC 1208.2 requires ceiling heights of 7'6" in all habitable rooms. Kitchens, bathrooms, storage rooms and laundry rooms may have ceiling heights of 7'. All rooms more than 70 square feet shall be considered to be habitable or occupied (CBC 1208.3). Furred ceiling heights must comply with CBC 1208.2.1. New rooms above garages or other new ancillary structures on the property will be considered habitable. Areas such as unfinished attic space, unfinished basements, unfinished storage rooms with only exterior access, unfinished ancillary structures and garages are considered nonhabitable.

"Major addition" means the addition of more than 500 square feet of habitable space to any main structure and/or ancillary structure (cumulative from the effective date of this policy and combined for all structures served by the same OWTS).

"Minor addition" means the addition of up to 500 square feet of habitable space to any main structure and/or ancillary structure (cumulative from the effective date of this policy and combined for all structures).

"Modification" means a remodel or addition of habitable space to an existing structure.

"Office Clearance" means a review of PRMD files and application documents in the office to determine that the proposed work will not impact the existing septic system.

"Rebuild" means the removal and/or replacement of the existing construction that goes beyond the limits set forth in this policy for a "Remodel." It does not change the building's square footage or footprint, the footprint of any habitable accessory structures, or result in any change in the anticipated sewage flow (as measured by the number of bedrooms or change of use). The removal and replacement of 50% or more of the exterior walls is considered to be a rebuild. The percentage of removal and replacement of exterior walls is cumulative from the effective date of this policy.

"Remodel" means the alteration of a structure that does not change the building's square footage or footprint, the footprint of any habitable accessory structures, or result in any change in the anticipated sewage flow (as measured by the number of bedrooms or change of use). The removal and replacement of less than 50% of the exterior walls is considered to be a remodel. The percentage of removal and replacement of exterior walls is cumulative from the effective date of this policy.

PROCEDURE

1. An Office Clearance for Minor Addition B-BLDs and/or Remodel B-BLDs shall be accepted when there are file records that provide documentation that the proposed work does not affect the OWTS or potential reserve expansion area, the OWTS was finalized less than 20 years before the date of Minor Addition and/or Remodel B-BLD application, and the septic system is not subject to Code Enforcement action.
2. Either a Findings Report or Field Clearance shall be required for the following:
 - a. Minor Addition B-BLDs and/or Remodel B-BLDs of permitted systems that received OWTS permit final construction approval more than 20 years before the date of the Minor Addition and/or Remodel B-BLD application.
 - b. Major Addition B-BLDs and Rebuild BLDs of permitted systems that received OWTS permit final construction approval less than 20 years before the date of the Major Addition and/or Rebuild B-BLD application and the septic system is not subject to Code Enforcement action.
3. A Field Clearance shall be required for the following:
 - a. Minor Addition B-BLDs and/or Remodel B-BLDS whenever there is insufficient file information to document the OWTS size and location (un-permitted systems) or when the septic system is subject to Code Enforcement action.
 - b. Major Addition B-BLDs and/or Rebuild BLDs whenever there is insufficient file information to document the OWTS size and location (un-permitted systems) or a permitted system received OWTS permit final construction approval more than 20 years before the date of the Major Addition or Rebuild B-BLD application or the septic system is subject to Code Enforcement action.
4. The Field Clearance and/or Findings Report shall include, at a minimum, the following information:
 - a layout diagram of the existing system;
 - evaluation of system performance (may include uncovering distribution boxes to insure that the system is functioning adequately);
 - age of system and expected life expectancy;
 - sizing of system;
 - replacement area availability;
 - inspection of all tanks and recent pumpers report (within last 5 years);
 - classification of system (code compliant, Class I or Class III).

5. PRMD shall determine if a waiver request to Basin Plan requirements is required for those existing OWTS that are required to meet Class I status for a Major Addition and/or Rebuild.
6. Any B-BLD clearance involving a retail food facility must be approved by the Department of Health Services, Division of Environmental Health.
7. Additional requirements may apply to properties located within waiver prohibition or septic system ban areas.
8. The provisions of this policy do not apply to properties damaged as a result of events of a local, state or federally declared state of emergency (e.g. earthquake, flood, fire, storm).

STANDARDS

The criteria established below shall be followed for all Well & Septic Division clearances on Building permit applications which result in a rebuild, remodel and/or addition to existing structures.

A. STANDARD MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR

A-BLDs do not require Well & Septic Division clearances. If the scope of work is exceeded to the point that the work no longer qualifies as an A-BLD, a Well & Septic Division Clearance is required. B-BLDs for foundation repair and re-roofing with limited framing replacement (see PRMD Policy 4-0-7 *A-BLD Permits*), disability accessibility improvements, FEMA flood elevations and seismic safety improvements do require Well & Septic clearance, but are not considered a remodel or rebuild for purposes of triggering a septic system upgrade, unless the structure is on a cesspool or the septic system is in failure.

B. RESIDENTIAL BEDROOM ADDITIONS AND CHANGES IN USE

Any change in use (e.g. change from residential to commercial or changes in the nature of commercial use) that results in an increase in wastewater flow and/or wastewater characteristics, and/or any additional bedroom beyond the design capacity of the system shall require a Code Compliant OWTS.

C. MINOR ADDITIONS AND REMODELS

Minor Additions and remodels, not including additional bedrooms and/or change in use, shall be allowed with a Class III OWTS (or better), provided the following conditions are met:

1. Verifiable information on the location, construction, integrity and function of the existing system is available.

2. An addition may not encumber any potential reserve expansion area.
3. If reserve expansion area is limited, the property owner shall sign and notarize a Conditional Statement in acknowledgment that the structure(s) is served by a Class III OWTS with limited reserve expansion area.

D. MAJOR ADDITIONS AND REBUILDS

Major Additions and Rebuilds, not including additional bedrooms and/or change in use, require a Class I OWTS, provided the following conditions are met:

1. Verifiable information on the location, construction, integrity and function of the existing system is available.
2. An addition may not encumber any potential reserve expansion area.
3. Expansions of the existing footprint are not allowed if a replacement system cannot be adequately sized due to site constraints. A system where only a seepage pit reserve expansion area is available is not considered to be adequately sized.

E. COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

1. The same criteria and requirements that apply to Residential "Additions", "Rebuilds" and "Remodels" apply to Commercial construction activities subject to Well and Septic clearances for B-BLD permit issuance.
2. Any clearance involving a retail food facility must be approved by the Department of Health Services, Division of Environmental Health.
3. If the addition, rebuild, remodel or change in use has the potential for increasing or changing the volume and/or strength of the wastewater discharged to the OWTS beyond the design flow, the following is required:
 - a. The applicant's consulting Registered Civil Engineer (RCE) or Registered Environmental Health Specialist (REHS) must evaluate the proposed sewage flows, characteristics and the adequacy of the existing OWTS.
 - b. Any necessary modifications to the system shall be designed by an RCE or REHS in accordance with current standards. The California Plumbing Code (CPC), EPA Design Manual or other approved source shall be used as guides for sizing commercial OWTS if actual water use information is not available. Actual water use data should be used whenever possible with a factor of safety incorporated.

- c. Other sewage flow estimates may be considered by PRMD if supported by technical documentation such as a comparative study of at least three similar type establishments. Projected wastewater loading shall be fully substantiated with estimated number of patrons, employees, etc.
- d. A code compliant OWTS is required if there is an increase in the volume or strength of the wastewater generated.

Approved by:

/s/ Pete Parkinson

Pete Parkinson, Director

Lead Author: Bob Swift

Previously:

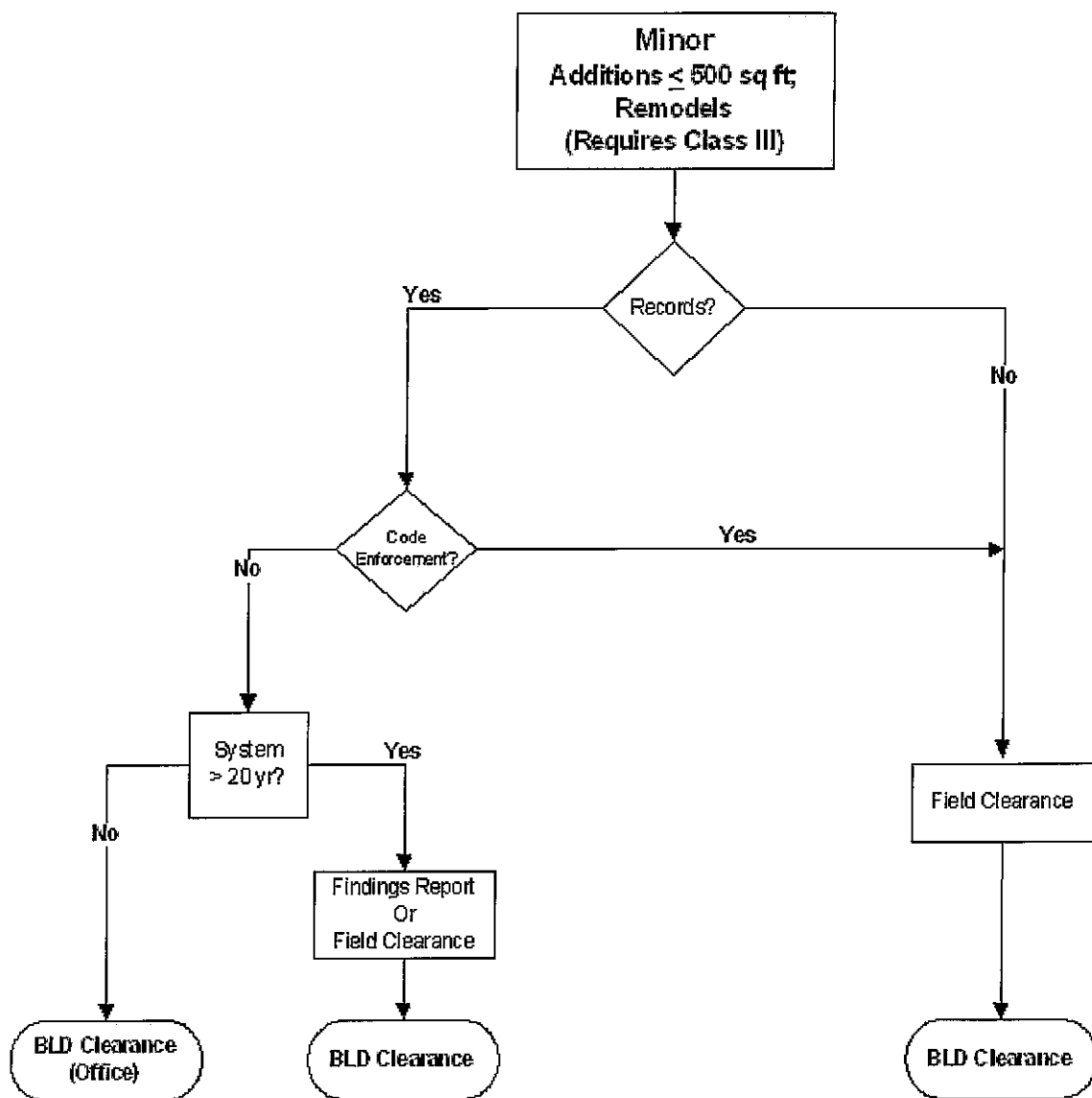
9-2-12 Guidelines for Remodeling and Additions with Respect to Septic Systems (effective date 07/01/06)

and

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MINOR ADDITIONS AND REMODELS**



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