

Vermont Environmental Report

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Sewage Treatment

Relief in Sight for the Unsewered Town

As the September VER goes to press, a Conference Committee of the U.S. House and Senate is considering changes in the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972. These changes could have decided impacts on Vermont's own water pollution control programs.

Earlier this year the House and Senate passed two very different bills to amend the 1972 law. Now a Conference Committee is seeking to reconcile the differences before Congress adjourns this fall.

In several respects, the Senate version is more far-reaching than the House bill. It contains key provisions that would affect the construction grants program for sewage treatment plants.

Michele Frome, Director of VNRC's "Workbook on Sewage Treatment Alternatives" project, has been following the progress of the Congressional deliberations. She strongly supports two provisions in the Senate bill. One, an amendment introduced by Sen. Robert Stafford (R-Vt.), would set aside 5% to 10% of the construction grants funds in rural states for use only for "alternative or unconventional systems" in communities of 2,500 people or less. Another provision would make private sewage systems serving individual households eligible for federal funding as long as it is a municipality that applies for the funds and develops a plan to insure proper operation and maintenance of these individual systems.

Frome is enthusiastic about these new proposals. "If passed," she says, "these provisions could really make a difference in some Vermont towns. The logic is this: that

towns might be more willing to consider alternative systems and more able to pay for them if the same kind of financial assistance that is now available to construct conventional treatment plants can be extended to include other choices.

"But changes won't happen overnight," Frome warns. Even if the Senate amendments are passed the money won't be available right away. The federal Environmental Protection Agency will have to prepare regulations spelling out what the phrase "alternative systems" means, who is eligible, and what kind of operation and maintenance plans will be required.

The new provisions could make a difference for small communities such as Barton, Vermont. A sewage treatment plant proposed for Barton would have cost \$2.8 million. The Town's share of this cost was to be \$450,000. Barton is an unusual town. Citizens voted to reject the federal money. The Town of Barton chose instead to tell the 40 or so polluting householders to install their own individual septic systems. At a rough estimate of \$1,000 each, these 40 septic systems will cost a total of \$40,000. Under the current law, Barton will receive no State or federal funds for this work. If the Senate amendments are adopted, however, it could change the whole picture for Barton and a lot of other communities in the same situation.

Reginald "Tex" LaRosa, Chief of Environmental Engineering at the Agency of Environmental Conservation in Montpelier, thinks that Vermont will see "the largest use of these new funds in unsewered parts of towns that already have conventional treatment plants." (Our italics.)