



PROTECTING SPRINGS BASINS

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are the permitting requirements for septic systems changing?

In 2016, the Florida Legislature identified 30 "Outstanding Florida Springs" that require additional protections to ensure their conservation and restoration for future generations. These protections are outlined in restoration plans, known as Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs), focused on reducing nitrogen pollution that is impacting the water quality of these springs. In some areas, effluent water from septic tanks has been identified as a major contributor of nitrogen pollution. Where this occurs, the law requires the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to include a septic system remediation plan within that springs BMAP. The law requires specific actions regarding both existing and new septic systems located near impacted springs within areas known as Priority Focus Areas (PFAs).

Why are these changes to septic system permitting important?

Nitrogen pollution is impacting the water quality of many of Florida's Outstanding Springs. Effluent water from conventional septic systems is high in nitrogen, and that water leaves the septic system drain field, reaches the aquifer and emerges in the springs. While conventional septic systems are good at removing some pollutants from wastewater, they are not designed to remove nitrogen. To restore spring water quality, contributing septic systems need to be either removed or upgraded to include enhanced nitrogen-reducing technology.

What Florida Department of Health (DOH)-approved nitrogen-reducing septic systems exist?

Nitrogen-reducing options include in-ground nitrogen-reducing biofilters (INRBs), nitrogen-reducing (NSF 245-certified) aerobic treatment units, and nitrogen-reducing Performance-Based Treatment Systems. Each of these options is described here:

http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/onsite-sewage/products/_documents/bmap-n-reducing-tech-18-10-29.pdf

Why are septic systems being addressed only in certain areas?

Septic systems pose the highest threat to water quality in areas where they are located near springs with highly permeable (sandy) soil. These vulnerable areas are identified as Priority Focus Areas (PFAs) in the remediation plans.

How can I find out if I am affected by new system permitting requirements?

Requirements for new septic system permits apply to lots less than one acre within a PFA.

How do I know if I live in the Priority Focus Area?

View the [interactive map](#), enter your address in the upper right, and click on the search icon.

How will homeowners be affected if they have an existing septic system?

*For existing systems within the Priority Focus Areas, nothing will immediately change (unless you add a room on to your home). However, in the future, failing systems will need to be enhanced with nitrogen-removing technology or the home/business will need to connect to central sewer. These requirements will be put in place after the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) has completed rulemaking for septic systems. These requirements will be phased in no later than five years after the adoption of the restoration plans. **Homeowners in the PFAs for Blue, DeLeon, and Gemini Springs may voluntarily upgrade their existing systems to a nitrogen-reducing system sooner and receive cost-share assistance. Click on this link for more information on cost-share assistance:***

<https://floridadep.gov/springs/restoration-funding/content/septic-upgrade-incentive-program>

How and where will permitting for new septic systems change?

Requirements for new homes or businesses installing new septic systems on lots less than one acre within the Priority Focus Areas of DeLeon and Gemini Springs have changed. These new systems are required to include enhanced treatment of nitrogen. The installation of nitrogen-reducing systems are not required if a central sewer connection project is planned by a local government and the project has been included in the remediation plan. These changes will apply to all new system permits issued on or after adoption of the Basin Management Action Plan (no later than July 1, 2018).

What became effective on January 1, 2019?

Requests for new septic permits within the Priority Focus Areas of DeLeon and Gemini Springs on lots less than one acre are required to install a nitrogen treatment system or connect to sewer.

Septic permit regulations within the PFA of Blue Spring are on hold pending the resolution of several legal challenges to the rule within that BMAP.

What are the options for upgrading your septic system to a nitrogen treatment system?

FDOH designates which treatment systems are permissible. You can view [their website](#) and/or contact them directly for current information at 850-245-4250 or AskEH@flhealth.gov to obtain a list or verify that the system you are interested in is permissible within the BMAP requirements.

What happens when the power goes out on a septic system that requires electricity?

Because septic system design can vary, questions about specific systems can be answered by your Florida Department of Health (FDOH) representative or design professional. FDOH has a research team that can be contacted at 850-245-4250 or AskEH@flhealth.gov.

What is the process for connecting to sanitary sewer?

If your home is eligible for sanitary sewer service, your local utility provider can walk you through the process to connect your property to sanitary sewer.

What is the cost for the upgraded septic systems?

First, determine that your selected system is permitted by Florida Department of Health (FDOH) per BMAP requirements. Contact a local contractor to obtain cost information. The manufacturer can provide information about local contractors trained to install and provide maintenance of nitrogen reduction systems. Contact FDOH directly for specific questions and current information at 850-245-4250 or AskEH@flhealth.gov.

What is the cost for connecting to sanitary sewer?

Each local utility provider sets the hookup rates based on their own criteria. Contact your local utility provider to determine the cost for your property.

Are there any grants or government assistance for paying for these options?

Yes, homeowners in the PFAs for Blue, DeLeon, and Gemini Springs may voluntarily upgrade their existing systems to a nitrogen-reducing system sooner and receive cost-share assistance. Click on this link for more information on cost-share assistance:

<https://floridadep.gov/springs/restoration-funding/content/septic-upgrade-incentive-program>

How do I know which type of advanced system to choose for my lot size?

Florida Department of Health has information on lot size requirements on [their web page](#).

What is the status of the passive septic drainfield availability?

Rule updates for the Florida Department of Health are located at flrules.org. TC: this is a terrible link!

Can any septic company install these nitrogen treatment systems?

Septic system installers must have appropriate training to install nitrogen treatment systems. When installing septic systems, always do your due diligence to ensure you have contracted a state licensed septic tank contractor or a state licensed plumber to do the work.

- Information on [State Licensed Septic Tank Contractors](#)
- Information on [State Licensed Plumbers](#)

Contact [Florida Onsite Wastewater Association](#) for more information.

Is my neighborhood scheduled for sanitary sewer hookups in the near future?

Please contact your local utility provider to determine if your home is scheduled for sanitary sewer hookup.

My septic system is working and I have it pumped out regularly, do I need to upgrade?

Yes. Unfortunately, regular maintenance of a septic system only addresses bacteria and does not address the nutrients that are causing impairment of our spring shed. Only upgrading to a nitrogen treatment system or hooking up to sanitary sewer can help address this issue.

I am in a rural area, can I still hookup to sanitary sewer?

Your local utility provider can provide you with information on whether sanitary sewer is available or may become available for your area.

What happens in 20 years if the targets are not met?

Florida Department of Environmental Protection will review the water-quality data every five years, assess the progress and adjust the focus and requirements as needed.

Do I have to upgrade my system now or when it fails?

Your system will have to be upgraded if it fails, and, if it does not, all systems within the Priority Focus Area will need to be upgraded within the next 20 years.