

**Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.**  
*Governor*

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*State Health Commissioner*



# Indiana State Department of Health

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## **Indiana State Department of Health Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force**

### **FINAL REPORT**

**October 5, 2005**

## **Introduction**

The Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) established the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force in July 2005 in response to concerns about onsite sewage systems.

## **Purpose of Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force**

The purpose of the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force was to develop the strategic objectives that the ISDH should accommodate as it considers residential onsite sewage system regulation. As a part of this strategic development, a goal was to hear from persons who could describe problems and issues with septic systems and septic system regulation so that the ISDH could better understand what challenges must be acknowledged and accommodated.

## **Participants**

The ISDH selected the participants for the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force and provided guidance on the structure of the task force. The participants for the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force were:

Steve Adams (Facilitator)  
Director of Strategic Development  
Indiana Office of Rural Affairs

Chuck Andres  
St. Leon, IN

Dick Blazer  
Kokomo, IN

Bill Grant  
LaGrange County Health Department  
LaGrange, IN

Don Jones  
Dept. of Agricultural and Biological Engineering  
Purdue University

Brad Lee  
Dept. of Agronomy  
Purdue University

James Sullivan  
Ground Water Section  
Indiana Department of Environmental Management

Rick Wajda  
Indiana Builders Association  
Indianapolis, IN

Bob Watkins  
Elkhart County Health Department  
Goshen, IN

Richard Wise  
Indiana Capacity Center  
Indiana Environmental Health Association  
Indianapolis, IN

Michelle Milliken  
Legislative Liaison  
Indiana State Department of Health

Terry Whitson  
Assistant Commissioner  
Indiana State Department of Health

During the course of the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force, the task force invited the participation of several individuals to provide information and discussion on septic system issues. The following individuals gave presentations and participated in task force meetings:

Howard Cundiff  
Director of Division of Consumer Protection  
Indiana State Department of Health

Alan Dunn  
Program Director of Onsite Sewage Systems Program  
Indiana State Department of Health

Kris Conyers  
Howard County Health Department

Alice Quinn  
Grant County Health Department

Bob McKean  
Indiana Builders Association

The recording secretary for the task force was:

Teresa Watson  
Indiana State Department of Health

## **Meetings of the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force**

The Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force met four times from July 26, 2005 to September 13, 2005. The following is an overview of topics covered at the meetings:

Tuesday, July 26, 2005: 10:30 – 12:30

- Overview of septic systems and the regulatory process by Howard Cundiff and Alan Dunn
- Discussion on sewage system issues

Tuesday, August 9, 2005: 10:30 – 12:30

- Discussion by local health departments on problems with sewage systems and issues in administering state rules on residential onsite sewage systems with presentations by Bill Grant, Kris Conyers, and Alice Quinn
- Discussion by builders on issues relating to the construction, maintaining, and approval process for residential onsite sewage systems with a presentation by Bob McKean

Tuesday, August 30, 2005: 10:30 – 12:30

- Discussion by task force members on issues and potential solutions

Tuesday, September 13, 2005: 10:30 – 12:30

- Development of recommendations for addressing onsite sewage system problems and issues

## **Issues**

In 2003, the Indiana Land Resources Council established a Rural Wastewater Task Force. That task force concluded and issued a report in November 2003. The report identified eight recommendations and accompanying action steps.

The rules in existence at the time of this Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force date back to at least 1990. In the years preceding the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force, the ISDH worked on a revision of the residential onsite sewage system rules. A proposed rule revision was promulgated between 2002 and 2004. That promulgation process ended in July 2004 without changes to the rules. At the time of the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force, there was no promulgation of residential onsite sewage system rules in progress. In establishing this short-term, focused task force, the ISDH hoped to gain input on problems and issues with sewage systems and develop an approach to addressing these problems and issues. The purpose of the task force was not to write rules.

## **Recommendations**

Based on numerous presentations, extensive discussion, and the professional expertise of its members, the Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force offers the following recommendations to the Indiana State Department of Health. The recommendations are not ranked in any particular priority or order. The task force believes that the recommendations of the 2003 Rural Wastewater Task Force continue to have merit and encourage the consideration and implementation of those recommendations.

*Recommendation 1: For the immediate future, because the existing rules work if properly followed, maintain the current rules for onsite sewage systems. Attempt to resolve existing issues related to onsite sewage systems prior to making changes to the current onsite sewage system rules.*

*Recommendation 2: Move toward a performance-based regulatory system rather than the current prescriptive-based regulatory system.*

- A. Develop and move toward a performance-based regulatory system that promotes responsibility and accountability for onsite sewage system performance but allows flexibility in the design of the system consistent with the specifications needed to the project.
- B. Amend the onsite sewage system rules as needed in small increments to add new technologies or implement elements of a performance-based regulatory system.
- C. Utilize program guidance letters, letters of “best practices” and directives, developed with the collaboration of academic institutions, local health departments, or others with demonstrated skills and knowledge of soils and the onsite wastewater disposal profession, to provide information and guidance as to which systems are recommended for use in particular situations and information needed to promote the safe and effective use of onsite sewage systems.

*Recommendation 3: Improve the data available to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of onsite sewage systems.*

- A. Develop and implement a system for the collection of data at a minimum to include the number of onsite sewage systems, the location of the onsite sewage systems, the type of the onsite sewage systems, and identification of failed systems.
- B. Study failed onsite sewage systems to include the number of failures, reasons for failures, and number of contaminated wells, lakes, or streams resulting from failures.
- C. Develop a roster of local health department onsite sewage system requirements and publish on the ISDH Web site.
- D. Promote the standardization of data collection between state and local health departments.

- E. Enhance the ISDH Web site to improve the availability of information and training opportunities.
- F. Study the potential uses of global information system (GIS) technology to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of onsite sewage system inspections.

*Recommendation 4: Encourage and promote a certification program for onsite sewage system technicians, installers, inspectors, and regulators.*

- A. Work with the professional associations, academic institutions, and local health departments to establish a recommended curriculum based on identifiable standards to be used for certification programs.
- B. Recommend and encourage the participation of onsite sewage system technicians, installers, inspectors, and regulators in voluntary certification programs that comply with the recommended curricular standards.
- C. Encourage reciprocity between local health departments to recognize and accept certifications from recommended certification programs.
- D. Move towards mandatory state certification of onsite sewage system technicians, installers, inspectors, and regulators once the voluntary certification program is operational and effective.
- E. Create a task force to review and make recommendations on funding and structure issues related to certification, training, and research.

*Recommendation 5: Develop ongoing training programs and structure for onsite sewage system contractors, technicians, installers, inspectors, and regulators to improve knowledge base and promote coordination and consistency throughout the state.*

- A. Work with the professional associations, academic institutions, and local health departments to develop and provide initial training programs required for certification.
- B. Work with the professional associations, academic institutions, and local health departments to develop and provide continuing training programs on advanced and specialized topics relating to onsite sewage systems.
- C. Explore the use of the state learning management system and other distance learning systems to provide easier and less costly access to training programs.
- D. Ensure a stable funding mechanism and infrastructure to provide training programs.
- E. Utilize the ten state public health districts to assist with the dissemination of information.

*Recommendation 6: Promote the development of a state onsite wastewater management research and training center.*

- A. Create an independent advisory panel to promote the study of onsite sewage systems and recommend effective, reliable, and cost-effective solutions to onsite sewage system issues.
- B. Involve the independent advisory panel in the review and recommendation of new technologies.
- C. Develop onsite training locations to be used for the purpose of improving training programs. Varying “onsite demonstration” systems should be installed at each location in order to facilitate evaluation of effectiveness or lack thereof for that type of system and to serve as a training center.

*Recommendation 7: Promote the proper maintenance of new and repaired onsite sewage systems.*

- A. Develop a system for maintaining maintenance records on new and repaired onsite sewage systems.
- B. Develop a system for evaluating maintenance records as a means of evaluating contractors, installers, soil areas in the county, and the timely maintenance of systems.
- C. Consider requiring mandatory maintenance and reporting for onsite sewage systems.

*Recommendation 8: Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the onsite sewage system permitting and approval processes.*

- A. Develop and implement a system for ensuring that permits are issued in a timely, efficient, and effective manner.
- B. Streamline the permit system and promote consistency between local health departments.
- C. Study whether the development and implementation of an online system for permitting would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the permitting and approval process and provide for improved data collection.

*Recommendation 9: Improve and promote access to and use of alternative and experimental technologies for onsite sewage systems.*

- A. Improve the efficiency of the alternative and experimental technology approval process to ensure the timely review and approval of alternative and experimental technologies.
- B. Improve the data collection on alternative and experimental technologies to include their effectiveness and failure rate.

- C. Carefully review the peer-reviewed research and monitoring data collected in other states before deciding whether to duplicate monitoring efforts, investigations, and demonstrations in Indiana.
- D. Continue the responsibility of local health department for ensuring the operation and maintenance of alternative and experimental onsite sewage systems.
- E. Solve issues surrounding cluster systems and eliminate bureaucratic obstacles to their appropriate use.

*Recommendation 10: The role of the Indiana State Department of Health should be that of a training and support role for local health departments.*

- A. Clearly identify and distinguish between the roles of the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM), the Indiana State Department of Health, and local health departments.
- B. Continue home rule of local health departments as to permitting and inspection of onsite sewage systems.
- C. Improve and support the ability of local health departments to perform their responsibilities as to onsite sewage systems.
- D. Promote public health issues related to onsite sewage systems.

*Recommendation 11: Convene a group to recommend specific steps needed to implement the recommendations of the 2005 Indiana State Department of Health Onsite Wastewater Strategy Task Force.*

- A. This group should include:
  - 1. A facilitator knowledgeable in public health policy issues within the context of land use, economic development, and environmental quality;
  - 2. A representative from the Indiana Onsite Wastewater Professionals Association;
  - 3. A representative from the Indiana Builders Association;
  - 4. Knowledgeable and experienced personnel from local health departments;
  - 5. A representative from the Indiana Rural Development Council; and
  - 6. Academic representation knowledgeable of onsite wastewater treatment systems and soils from Purdue University.