

## Opinion – Blanket sewage rules stink

By Doug Dobrowolski

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There are few subjects less appealing than sewage. A discussion around how to properly dispose of our domestic waste is probably not one most of us would choose to have. Yet this is a hugely important issue for all of us. If you live in a city like Winnipeg or Brandon or Portage la Prairie or Steinbach it's possible you don't think much beyond the flush. Why would you? Your waste is taken away, treated in a facility specially designed for the purpose, and disposed of in as environmentally friendly a manner as possible.

However, if your house sits on property larger than a few acres anywhere in rural Manitoba—as thousands do—you likely know much more about sewage disposal than the average city dweller. This is because your waste products are often treated and disposed of somewhere on your property. Either by your own design or that of a former owner your land may have what is called a sewage ejector system in place to deal with the waste produced by your household.

It works like this: wastewater travels from your house through a line that carries it to a location carefully chosen for its soil type, ground and surface water conditions, and distance from the home. Pressure forces the ejector head to exit the ground and discharge the effluent (which looks like dirty dishwater at this point), where it lies on top of the ground.

While it may sound unscientific and even a little gross, under proper conditions the ground has the capacity to effectively treat the sewage without the spread of harmful nutrients or pathogens. The type of soil suitable for ejectors does not permit quick absorption. Instead, the waste is treated by natural sunlight, the liquid evaporates, and the remaining solids are absorbed through natural filtration. This type of system has long been recognized—again, in certain areas with the right soil conditions—as an acceptable, effective, natural way of treating and disposing of domestic waste.

Back in January, Manitoba Conservation proposed new rules for these types of systems, which came into effect earlier this week after a months-long consultation period. Some of the changes make a lot of sense. For instance, some areas—such as the Red River corridor which runs from the U.S. border to Lake Winnipeg—are particularly vulnerable to environmental damage from waste and its by-products. In these recognized “sensitive areas”, the Province decided to take action by banning septic fields. Makes sense, right? However, the new rules also ban sewage ejectors altogether, and require existing ejectors to be phased out as property changes hands—not only in sensitive areas, but province-wide.

As the organization representing all 198 of Manitoba's municipalities, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) heard from our members as soon as the Province proposed these changes. Some

members were supportive. The City of Selkirk and other municipalities along the Red River corridor welcomed the new rules, primarily due to their location within a designated sensitive area.

However, many municipalities have serious concerns with the changes.

It is common knowledge that human waste poses health risks, and rural Manitobans are probably more aware of this than anyone. But Manitoba is a geographically diverse province and in many areas sewage ejectors work very well. If they did not, don't you think rural property owners would be the first to embrace a new system? We are all concerned with our health and the environment, but rural citizens especially must take an educated and active role in the disposal of their waste. There is no "not in my backyard" syndrome here—these are the places where people live and raise their families, and health and safety is always top of mind. It has to be.

Then there is the cost. If I want to sell my property, the new rules state I must first replace my ejector system with a septic field—even though septic fields are certainly not failsafe. This will cost a minimum of \$6,000, and in some cases—depending on the type of soil I have and other factors—up to \$20,000. In the Rural Municipality of Morris, for example, the soil is primarily heavy clay and those homeowners would have to pay a higher cost to truck in sand required for a septic field. With rural depopulation already a problem, this is simply another hit to small communities struggling to attract—and keep—residents.

And the kicker is the Province heard these arguments from the beginning of the consultation process. On the AMM's advice it extended the consultation period until May to meet with municipalities and hear their concerns and suggestions. It then proceeded to cover the entire province with one blanket even after receiving the same message over and over again: Banning ejectors in sensitive areas makes perfect sense. Banning them everywhere—without scientific reasoning and at a huge cost to rural property owners—does not.

Municipalities understand and agree with the Province's desire to take strong measures to protect human health and the environment in areas where risks and concerns have been identified. What they do not understand is the heavy-handed approach everywhere else.