

# Some want Michigan to regulate septic tanks to protect water quality

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**23**  
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*The Michigan Environmental Council's water policy director, Megan Tinsley. Image: Michigan Environmental Council*

By Elijah Taub

Being a state with direct access to a lot of freshwater creates opportunities for housing, jobs and tourism.

However, the quality of Michigan's water is threatened due to poorly maintained septic tanks, according to environmental advocates pushing for legislation to require periodic inspections of septic systems statewide.

Currently, it's up to local governments whether to regulate septic systems and mandate inspections periodically or when property ownership changes.

Despite its vast network of rivers, streams and lakes, as well as groundwater, Michigan remains the only state without a statewide sanitary code, which would include septic systems.

That means that there is no state regulation for the inspections of septic tanks, so a system could be unchecked forever.

The Michigan Environmental Council's water policy director, Megan Tinsley, said, "There could certainly be E. coli in sewage. If any septic system is leaking, it could be potentially infiltrating where someone's well water is being collected."

Drinking water is at risk because leaks from septic tanks get into the groundwater, which eventually puts sewage into the drinking water supply.

Two bills are pending that would address the problem of leaky septic systems. They are awaiting review by the House Committee on Natural Resources, Environment, Tourism and Outdoor Recreation.

If the legislation passes, there would be standards for new and existing septic systems that would require inspections at the time of sale in all counties.

Sponsors include Democratic Reps. Phil Skaggs of East Grand Rapids, Sharon McDonnell of Troy, Donovan McKinney of Detroit, Kara Hope of Holt, Carol Glanville of Walker, Joey Andrews of St. Joseph and Laurie Pohutsky of Livonia, who chairs the committee.

“We’re working on getting these bills passed,” Tinsley said. “Interest groups have come together such as public health departments, environmental groups and anyone who has a keen interest in these bills.”

Concerns about the legislation include the costs of staffing and facilities for the state and county health departments, she said.

“If there’s a proper way of doing this, I don’t see why not,” said Patrick Stewart, who owns property in Lewiston.

“It’s not like we have a lot of options to go to the bathroom up here,” he said.

Currently there is no statewide regulation of septic tank inspections. Some counties have created their own regulations. Also, some communities have passed ordinances that require septic tanks to be inspected during the selling process.

The Petoskey-based Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council has reported on the potential dangers of letting septic systems remain uninspected. One of its concerns is nutrients from the septic tanks that leak into groundwater.

“Having higher nutrient levels throws the ecosystem off, and it certainly impacts outdoor recreation,” Tinsley said.

Nutrients from septic tanks that go into the groundwater can seep into rivers and lakes, creating algae blooms. That significantly hinders the desire to be in the water, as well as activities such as fishing and canoeing.

*Elijah Taub reports for Capital News Service*

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