



MEMORANDUM

To: Jennifer Hunter

From: Matt Craig

Date: January 14, 2004

Re: Septic Owners Outreach Mailing: Final Report

Summary

In 2003 NHEP staff conducted a targeted education mailing to shoreland septic system owners within the coastal watershed. This outreach effort addressed Action Item WQ-13 of the NHEP *Management Plan*, which calls for the NHEP to “provide septic system maintenance information directly to shoreline property owners, and to other citizens of the Great Bay and coastal watersheds to help improve water quality.”

As part of this effort, NHEP staff sent out two mailings in June and July utilizing the NHEP Shoreland Property Owners database. The first mailing, sent in June, was mailed to approximately 120 addresses in Durham as a trial. To generate a list of addresses, NHEP staff updated the database by eliminating duplicates and bad addresses and by merging NHDES shoreline survey and shellfish program records into the database. The initial Durham mailing labels were addressed to the name of the last known property owner when available, and ‘Resident’ when not. Following the initial Durham mailing it was clear that approximately 15% of the addresses were outdated. For this reason, labels in the second mailing were addressed to ‘Septic System Owner.’ NHEP staff also collected information on town sewer lines, primarily by visiting municipal offices and examining town sewer line maps, and made approximations as to whether a property relied on town sewer or a private septic system. Sewer/septic information was recorded in the database and used to target mailing recipients.

Prior NHEP staff purchased septic-specific mailing materials. Packets included a cover letter, a septic owners file and guide, a septic cleaning reminder magnet with bullet septic facts, an NHEP “You Can Be Part of the Solution” flier, and an NHEP “I’m Part of the Solution” decal. The Durham mailing also included a postage-paid postcard soliciting feedback about the campaign. The NHEP received postcards from 14 of 120 recipients, or about 12%. Feedback was tepidly positive. Most respondents (10 of 14, or 71%) found the folder to be useful, but just 21% considered the magnet to be useful. Most recipients found the brochure to be either useful or somewhat useful (50% and 36%, respectively). However, the majority of recipients (79%) were not interested in receiving a free recorded telephone reminder to get their septic system inspected.

Based on this feedback, NHEP staff decided to use the existing packet to expand the campaign on a broader scale. The second mailing went out in July to approximately 650 addresses in other coastal communities, including Dover, Exeter, Greenland, Hampton, Hampton Falls, Madbury, New Castle, Newfields, Newington, Newmarket, North Hampton, Portsmouth, Rollinsford, Rye, Seabrook, and Stratham.

Of the 876 envelopes mailed to septic system owners, the US Postal Service returned 133 (15.2%) to the NHEP due to faulty address information. The majority of bad addresses appeared to come from NHDES records merged into the database. Following the mailing, six recipients notified the NHEP that they are on town sewer and did not have a septic system.

Recommendations

Enhance the educational content of mailings. The primary reason for working with shoreland septic system owners to improve septic maintenance and function is to improve estuarine water quality. With this in mind, future mailings should take a comprehensive approach to addressing this issue by explaining the relevance to estuaries and providing recipients with more informative materials. The mailing should draw a strong link between septic system function and estuarine health. Materials included with the 2003 mailing were weak in illustrating this connection.

Develop new methods to obtain mailing addresses. The amount of staff time necessary to cull faulty addresses, obtain updated addresses, and identify septic vs. town sewer lines was high given the benefits received. A significant number of addresses in the shoreland database remain outdated or incorrect, and it is difficult and time consuming to maintain a current database. Possible sources to investigate might include: partnering with watershed organizations to maintain their own current mailing lists and enlisting the services of a mass mailing marketing company. As an alternative, watershed organizations and other entities could be recruited to aid in the door-to-door distribution of materials.

Develop new methods of identifying septic system owners. The integrity of these data is questionable and new ways of identifying homes that are on private septic systems are needed. Possible sources to investigate might include NHDES shoreline survey staff, NHDES septic permitting staff, the septic maintenance/waste disposal industry, and municipal wastewater treatment staff.

Conduct a needs/audience assessment. Future efforts to address WQ-13 should be driven by an identified need. An audience analysis to identify barriers to septic system maintenance will assist the development of appropriate educational materials to eliminate those barriers.

Overall, I recommend improving the educational content of future septic mailings. I do not recommend utilizing the shoreland database for similar outreach campaigns unless more accurate sources of address and waste disposal information become available. The expenditure of staff time and resources needed to maintain an accurate shoreland database are costly when utilization of the database is taken into consideration.