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# ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet

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## Before You Buy A Property: Questions to Ask About Water and Sewage Disposal

Before a real estate purchase, some of the last things considered are the water supply and individual sewage disposal system (ISDS, aka septic system). To avoid confusion after the sale is complete, buyers are encouraged to ask some questions before the purchase.

### **Terms Used**

**Individual Sewage Disposal System (ISDS):** A wastewater system that stores, treats, and disposes of domestic sewage, commonly known as a septic system. An ISDS typically consists of a septic tank and effluent disposal area (EDA, commonly known as a leach field) and all piping from the building.

**Construction Approval (CA):** A permit issued by NHDES Subsurface Systems Bureau (SSB) Review staff permitting an ISDS to be installed along with an approved plan. Standard approvals are valid for 4 years from date of issuance; approvals for replacements for failed systems are valid for 90 days from date of issuance.

**Operational Approval (OA):** A permit issued by NHDES allowing the ISDS to be backfilled and put into use after an on-site examination by a state field inspector. Until an operational approval is issued, the system is not approved for use.

### **Water Supply**

#### **Does the property currently have a water supply?**

Typically, water is supplied by an on-site well or through a service connection provided by the municipality or another community entity. Undeveloped lots that are within a certain distance of a community or municipal water supply may be required to connect to these systems.

#### **For an existing on-site well, where is it? What type of well is it?**

Wells are typically located outside of building footprints, but can be obscured by structures or even long grass. Depending on site conditions, a well may be constructed in multiple ways. NHDES and the New Hampshire Water Well Board maintain records of all new wells constructed in New Hampshire since 1984 and are available using the “Well Completion Report” query at the [NHDES OneStop Well Completion Report Query Application NHDES OneStop Search website](#). Buyers are encouraged to have existing wells inspected to ensure they are properly sealed.

#### **For existing on-site wells, has the water been tested? Has the well ever been disinfected?**

NHDES recommends prospective buyers conduct a “NH Well Water Test for Home Buyers”. For more information, please visit the [NHDES Private Wells webpage](#).

## ***Sewage Disposal***

As described in New Hampshire statute [RSA 485-A:32](#), any structure that generates sewage or waste must either connect to a municipal sewer system or to a state approved ISDS. **Any structure that is plumbed for water or that can readily connect to an on-site water supply must also connect to an ISDS or sewer system.**

### **Does the property have NHDES Subdivision Approval?**

Since July 1, 1967, any lot less than 5 acres in size is required to have a Subdivision Approval from NHDES or its predecessor to ensure that the lot has the capacity to support a septic system or will be connected to a sewer system. NHDES will not have records for lots created before this and those lots may be restricted for further expansion or conversion to full-time occupancy.

### **Does the property currently have an ISDS or connect to a sewer system?**

Since 1967, new structures on lots located near bodies of water have been required to have a state approved ISDS. After 1971, new structures on all lots have required a state approved ISDS. NHDES will not have records for ISDS that predate these times. Lots located within 250 feet of waterbodies listed in the [NHDES Consolidated List of Waterbodies](#) also require a [Waterfront Site Assessment](#) at the time of sale. Undeveloped lots that are within a certain distance of a community or municipal sewer system may be required to connect to these systems.

### **For properties with an existing ISDS, does it have an NHDES Construction and Operational Approval?**

For an ISDS to be considered legally installed, it must have **both** an NHDES ISDS Construction and Operational Approval. The Operational Approval is critical because it ensures that the ISDS was installed as designed. If the current property owner does not have copies of the Construction Approval, Operational Approval and approved ISDS plan, buyers are urged to contact the municipality. For systems approved by NHDES since 1986, basic records can be viewed on the [NHDES OneStop Subsurface Query](#) by selecting "Subsurface Applications Status Query"; inquiries into records predating 1986 can submit an [Archive Records Request](#). Prospective buyers should confirm the bedroom count listed on the Construction and Operational Approvals match the real estate listing.

### **For properties with an existing ISDS, has it properly been maintained?**

To perform correctly, an ISDS needs proper to be maintenance. Septic tanks need to be pumped regularly, typically every two to three years. If the existing owner does not have a record of this, they may be able to direct you to the septage hauler that has provided maintenance in the past. The EDA needs to be kept free of woody vegetation with no signs of failure such as foul-smelling standing water. Inspections of the ISDS can be done by a NHDES Licensed ISDS Designer (use the [NHDES OneStop Subsurface Query](#) and select "Designer and Installer Query") or Septic System Evaluator (use the [NH OPLC website](#) and select "Septic System Evaluators").

### **For undeveloped properties, will it support an ISDS?**

Only a permitted ISDS Designer will be able to assess a site to see if there are characteristics or setbacks that would preclude the placement of an ISDS on a lot such as ledge outcrops, steep slopes, and wetlands. Contact the local municipality for permitted ISDS Designers that practice in the area or search for them by going to the [NHDES OneStop Subsurface Query](#) and selecting "Designer and Installer Query".

## ***Additional Information***

For more information, please contact the NHDES Subsurface Systems Bureau at [\(603\) 271-3501](#) or go to the [NHDES Subsurface Systems Bureau website](#).