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Barriers, Challenges, and Solutions to Implementing the Sanitary Sewer Services Provisions of Florida House Bill 1379[1]

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Introduction

Conventional septic systems have been identified as significant contributors to nitrogen pollution through the release of wastewater in Florida's Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) areas (Lusk et al., 2020). Enhanced nutrient-reducing systems are advanced on-site wastewater treatment technologies designed to reduce nutrient loadings beyond those of conventional septic systems. The 2016 Florida Water Bill (SB 552) requires targeted remediation in Priority Focus Areas (PFAs) where septic systems account for more than 20% of nitrogen loading, mandating sewer connections or enhanced nutrient-reducing systems for new and existing developments on lots under 1 acre (Krimsky et al., 2018). In 2023, House Bill 1379 Environmental Protection (HB 1379) expanded these requirements statewide, including the Indian River Lagoon and full BMAP areas; however, the implementation of HB 1379 remains ambiguous as details are lacking.

To address this, UF/IFAS Extension, in partnership with the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center), conducted a statewide needs assessment through focus groups with government and industry stakeholders. Researchers sought to delve deeper into the complexities surrounding HB 1379, specifically in BMAP-regulated areas, and the associated challenges in its implementation, specifically related to the sanitary sewer services (septic-to-sewer system conversions) and the enhanced nutrient-reducing septic systems provisions of HB 1379. This publication provides an overview of the research findings, including the challenges and barriers to implementing HB 1379, potential ways to address them, and communication and credible sources of information to explain HB 1379, as identified by research participants. This publication is intended to inform Extension faculty, Florida regulatory agencies, public utilities, septic- and sewer-related businesses, and contractors and home builders of major issues related to HB 1379 as well as possible solutions. This publication is one of two on HB 1379. More information about HB 1379 will be available in the Ask IFAS publication, "A Summary of New Septic System Requirements, Florida HB 1379."

Methods

The UF/IFAS PIE Center conducted focus groups between December 2024 and March 2025. Focus group participants were asked about their knowledge of septic-to-sewer system conversions and nutrient-reducing septic systems in relation to HB 1379 rollout, barriers and challenges faced by impacted audiences, and educational resources needed for those audiences. Seven focus groups in total, two held in person and five held via Zoom, were conducted. Invited participants represented state entities involved in septic system regulations, remediation, and education; local government bodies within target areas; and industry professionals potentially affected by HB 1379. The focus groups were conducted by geographic region. Regions were identified by springshed/watershed features and the outlined requirements in HB 1379 (north Florida, central Florida, south Florida, and Indian River Lagoon). Of the seven groups, four represented regional specialists working in public water resources and utilities entities related to septic and sewer systems. Two groups represented private company professionals working in the septic industry across the state of Florida. The remaining group represented a state-level perspective. In total, 34 individuals took part in this study. For the remainder of this publication, the term "regional participants" refers to the focus groups representing regional specialists in local, county, or state public agencies as defined above. The term "industry participants" refers to individuals from the two focus groups representing private companies

involved in the manufacture, installation, and maintenance of septic systems.

Barriers and Challenges to Implementing House Bill 1379

Barriers and challenges to implementing HB 1379 identified by both regional and industry participants included the cost of implementation, enforcement, agency transition, timeline, community participation to do upgrades and conversion, availability of resources, maintenance of upgraded systems, incentives, and affected areas.

Cost of Implementation

Participants identified cost as the primary barrier to implementing HB 1379. They said local governments and utilities must source additional funds or reallocate existing funding for the infrastructure required to complete septic-to-sewer conversions, potentially leading to higher costs passed on to utility customers. Without the funding to make changes to local sewer systems, participants said local governments will not be able to comply with the legislation's requirements. Participants were also concerned about the cost to homeowners to implement the nutrient-reducing septic systems provisions of HB 1379.

Enforcement and Agency Transition

Limited guidance on how the requirements will be enforced became an emerging theme across different regional groups. Questions were raised about accountability and compliance with the state policies, specifically on which enforcing entity would be responsible. Related to the issue raised on enforcement, regional participants indicated a lack of clarity and transparency about the transition of responsibilities from the Florida Department of Health (FDOH), which had previously held sole oversight of on-site sewage systems, to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), which took on regulatory oversight of on-site sewage systems effective July 1, 2021 (Florida Health, 2026). This complex role shift during a period of policy changes left regional specialists confused about which agency to direct their questions to and receive support from. While FDEP is responsible for enforcing statewide laws and rules about on-site sewage disposal, local county health departments in most of Florida still handle permitting and inspections.

Timeline

Regional participants said the timeline for completing upgrades was vague and unrealistic. They said the ambiguity surrounding the deadline for upgrading existing systems is creating uncertainty among key stakeholders within local agencies.

Community Participation in Upgrades and Conversion

The public's reception to the policies was described by regional participants as mostly positive, especially among individuals who are motivated by environmental factors such as water quality. Regional participants said residents may resist change due to gaps in understanding, inconvenience, or distrust in government initiatives. Without incentives and community understanding, regional specialists said they expect difficulty in achieving full community participation within areas affected by the bill. Industry participants also noted that community buy-in would be difficult for some communities to install enhanced nutrient-reducing septic systems for a short time if they were already slated to be converted to sewer systems in the future.

Availability of Resources

Several regional participants expressed uncertainty surrounding the availability of resources needed to implement HB 1379's requirements. They noted that funding, staffing, and infrastructure are all components needed to make the changes outlined in legislation. Regional participants reported struggling to obtain these resources through grants and other funding mechanisms. Participants said some areas targeted within the bill lack the necessary infrastructure to meet the new requirements. Participants expressed concern that the infrastructure elements, such as sewer lines and treatment facilities, take time to plan, build, and operate. Participants noted that the bill's requirements are also immediate, with no time for transition built in. Regional participants expressed their frustration with this challenge, as they were ready to make changes but lacked the infrastructure and materials to do so.

Maintenance of Upgraded Systems

Participants said aerobic treatment units — a type of enhanced nutrient-reducing system — require long-term maintenance and additional permitting, leading to challenges across a variety of audiences. Both groups said homeowners will need to source maintenance contracts and host an inspector on their property multiple times

throughout the year. They said the cost of maintenance and the burden of scheduling inspections and permits will lead to barriers for compliance. Permitting and inspection entities may experience an increase in workload that current staff numbers and resources cannot support.

Incentives

Regional participants said the legislation does not provide incentives for property owners to replace existing septic systems, leaving regional specialists with the task of educating and persuading individuals while seeking out creative incentive opportunities.

Areas Affected

Participants reported a lack of details on which areas and properties are subject to nutrient reduction requirements and how boundaries are drawn for septic-to-sewer conversions. Regarding nutrient-reducing septic systems, regional participants said uncertainty remains on the acreage required for lots to be upgraded and the criteria for the order in which different areas are to be upgraded. For septic-to-sewer conversions, participants reported boundaries cutting across city, municipality, and county lines, resulting in a lack of clarity on jurisdiction and coordination of conversion initiatives. Industry participants identified the timeline for upgrades and permitting as the least clear component of the bill.

Addressing Barriers and Challenges to Implementing House Bill 1379

After describing challenges and barriers associated with meeting the requirements of HB 1379, participants were asked to identify ways to address these issues. The following areas summarize their suggestions: funding, consistent messaging and education efforts, guidance from agencies, staffing, and effective practices for ongoing maintenance.

Funding

The most prevalent issue that emerged across both regional and industry focus group participants was the cost associated with meeting the bill's requirements. Regional participants noted the challenges faced by smaller municipalities with limited funds to facilitate infrastructure expansions and incentive programs for residents required to upgrade existing septic systems. Additional state funding and guidance on seeking grant support could be ways to address this challenge.

Consistent Messaging and Education Efforts

Many regional participants noted that the legislation lacked clarity and contained minimal guidance on how to enforce the bill's requirements. To address this, regional participants reiterated the need for consistent messaging and education efforts to a variety of audiences: municipal and county officials, homeowners, developers and home builders, and utility companies. By formalizing communication that explains the bill, the purpose of the policies, and those affected, both regional specialists and industry professionals said they would be equipped to educate clientele.

Guidance from Agencies

Regional participants reported a lack of guidance and confusion on agency jurisdiction during a time of policy change. They said a solution to this issue would be for one state agency with broad jurisdiction to take ownership of meeting the bill's requirements and providing timely guidance to all parties involved in implementing changes, including both regional specialists and industry professionals.

Staffing

Participants noted that additional knowledgeable and trained staff are required to implement HB 1379's policies, educate the public, inspect upgraded systems, and perform maintenance.

Efficient Practices for Ongoing Maintenance

Regional participants described ongoing maintenance for enhanced nutrient-reducing systems as a significant burden on the homeowner. Maintenance contracts are costly and require an inspector to visit the homeowner's property multiple times a year. Ongoing maintenance was described as a factor that deters those who may consider voluntarily upgrading their septic systems to meet legislative requirements. To combat this barrier, regional participants described a need for advanced technology that allows remote inspection or reduction of the number of times an inspector must visit the property. By sourcing unique ways to lower both the cost and burden of ongoing maintenance agreements, homeowners may become more inclined to upgrade their existing septic systems. Privatizing inspections or lowering the number of inspection visits could increase voluntary participation.

Communication and Credible Sources of Information

Participants provided their ideal forms of communication and credible sources of information related specifically to the sanitary sewer services and nutrient-reducing septic system requirements of House Bill 1379. The specifics of these are organized into several components, including communication format, information source, and the purposes of and the audiences for the communication.

Communication Format

Participants provided several formats for communication on the requirements of House Bill 1379, including both physical and digital methods. Physical forms of communication for homeowner audiences included postal mail, such as postcards, flyers, brief pieces of information included in regular mail such as property taxes, and door hangers. Participants described different types of digital communication, including email, e-newsletters, local news broadcasts, and social media. Beyond digital and physical forms of communication, participants reported the importance of in-person educational events, such as workshops, in communicating policies relevant to the industry.

Information Source

Participants emphasized the importance of utilizing a trusted and credible source when communicating policy information to the public. Perceived credible sources included state agencies such as FDEP and FDOH. Professional associations, such as the Florida Onsite Wastewater Association, were also noted as trustworthy sources, especially when targeting industry professionals responsible for system installation and maintenance. Local governments and their university collaborations through Cooperative Extension were reported as being a vital source of trustworthy education efforts within communities impacted by HB 1379's policies.

Purposes and Audiences

Participants outlined the purpose of these communication efforts and described the focus as communicating changes and impacts to affected audiences, including communities faced with conversion and system upgrade requirements. These audiences may be varied. Another core purpose would be to educate individuals with aerobic treatment units on maintenance contracts and communicate the importance of maintaining upgraded systems over time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the focus groups conducted for this study, the following recommendations for Extension faculty, Florida regulatory agencies, public utilities, septic- and sewer-related businesses, and contractors and home builders are provided.

- **Expand funding opportunities.** Create and/or expand grant funding for the implementation of HB 1379. This may be in the form of grants to local utility companies or local governments for septic-to-sewer conversions and to homeowners for upgrading their septic systems. A lack of funding was the primary barrier to overcome.
- **Identify agency leadership.** Clarify which state agency will lead the implementation of HB 1379 and communicate that widely. This was probably the second most common comment from the focus groups. Participants did not know whether the Department of Environmental Protection or the Department of Health was leading the effort to communicate about and enforce HB 1379.
- **Conduct an educational campaign.** It is recommended that an educational campaign be conducted that targets audiences mentioned in this study, including homeowners, developers and home builders, local elected officials, utilities, and septic system-related businesses. The educational campaign should focus on making the provisions of HB 1379 understandable across all audience groups. Because the audiences may vary in their existing knowledge of HB 1379, different messaging may need to be developed for each target audience. Similarly, create communication materials in print and digital formats to reach varied audiences.
- **Review the implementation timeline.** Reassess the timeline for implementing HB 1379's provisions. Many participants said the time frame was not feasible due to the lack of existing infrastructure, which would result in a lack of readily available materials and products.

Summary

By identifying the challenges and barriers to implementing House Bill 1379's provisions for sanitary sewer services and enhanced nutrient-reducing septic systems and identifying ways to address these challenges and barriers, as detailed in this publication, local and state agencies will be better able to implement this legislation in Florida.

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