EPA Decentralized Wastewater Program: Overview and Updates

Heidi Faller
U.S. EPA, Office of Wastewater Management

NOWRA Mega-Conference
October 27, 2026

Presentation Outline

- EPA Decentralized Program & MOU Partnership
- SepticSmart Week 2026
- CWSRF Supplemental Appropriation for Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the Hawai’i Wildfires (SA-HMW): Decentralized

Disclaimer: The comments made in this presentation are those of the presenter and not of NOWRA or the Mega-Conference sponsors.

Decentralized Program Background

- 1997 Report to Congress on Decentralized Systems in the US
  - Primary Finding: Decentralized systems can provide the same level of treatment, and may be less expensive than centralized wastewater (sewer) treatment
- Early 2000s: Decentralized Program created including issuance of many guidance documents, and MOU Partnership
- EPA program provides non-regulatory program support focused on outreach tools for homeowners, counties and states

Decentralized Wastewater MOU Partnership

- Collaboration among wastewater partners in government, industry, NGOs, and academia
- Established in 2005 with 8 partners
- Now 24 partners
- Next MOU renewal Dec 2026



MOU Partnership Accomplishments | 2023-2026



EPA expanded the Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap (CAWAG) initiative to include 150+ communities nationwide



The US Census Bureau included the 'septic system' question on the American Community Survey (ACS)



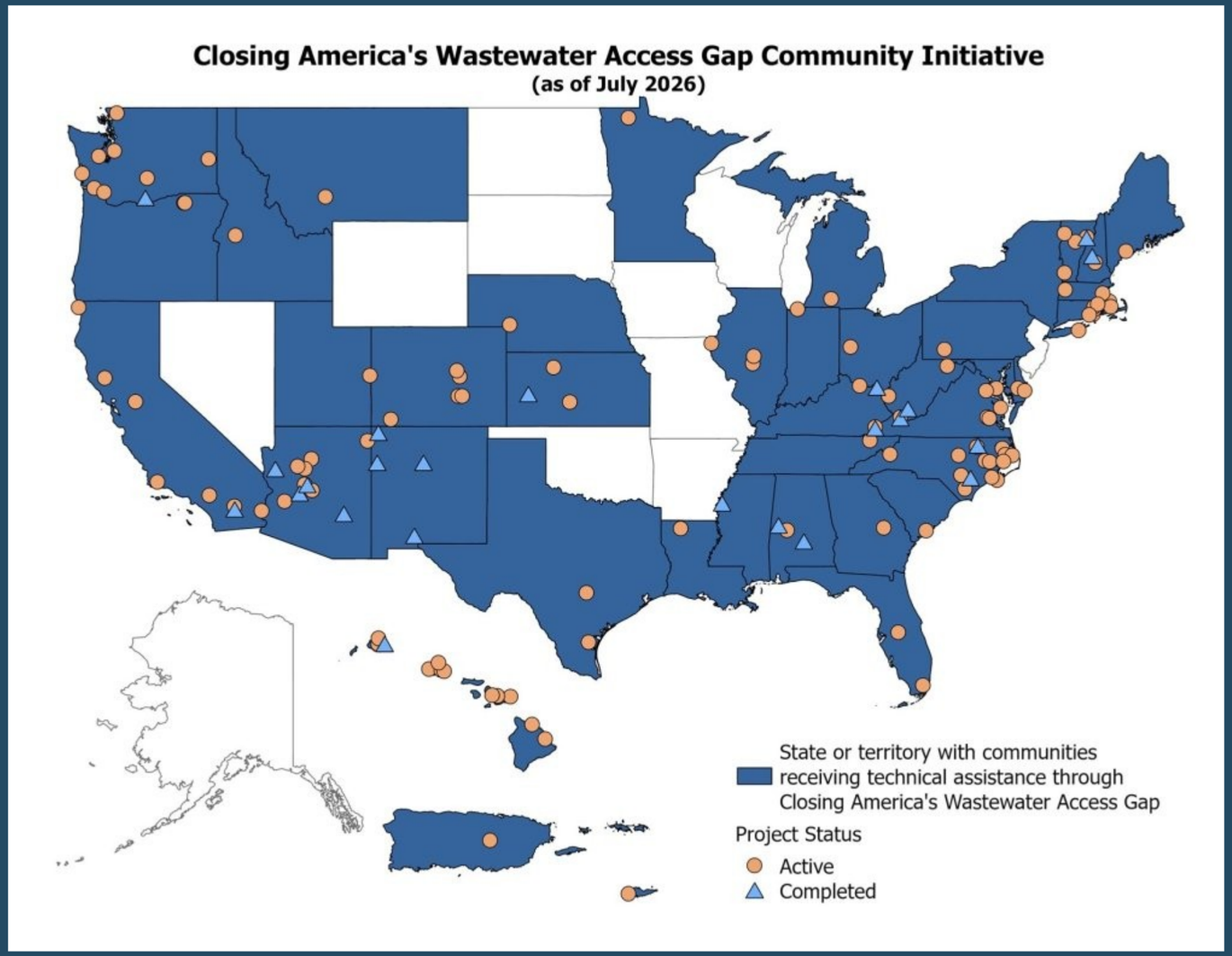
EPA and Indian Health Service (IHS) updated the Homeowner's Guide to Septic Systems for Tribal Communities



EPA developed a resource guide on the impacts of extreme weather events on decentralized systems

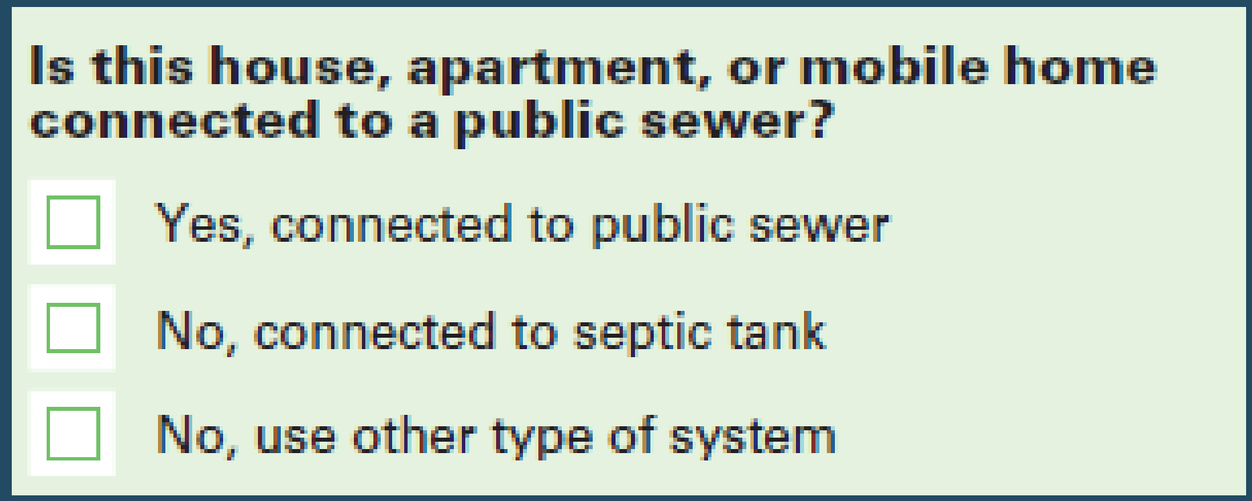
CAWAG Expansion

- The Closing America’s Wastewater Access Gap Initiative started as a pilot program in 2022
- Initiative expanded in 2024 with funds from IIJA
- RealWater TA provides no-cost assistance with:
  - Wastewater engineering services
  - Funding identification and applications



US Census Septic System Question

- **1990** – Last time the ACS collected septic data
- **2018** – Census started testing language of septic question, including interviews and building organizational support
- **Jan 2025** – Began data collection for the new ACS septic question
- **Fall 2026** – Data available for communities with **65,000+ residents**
- **2029** – Data available for communities with **fewer than 65,000 residents**

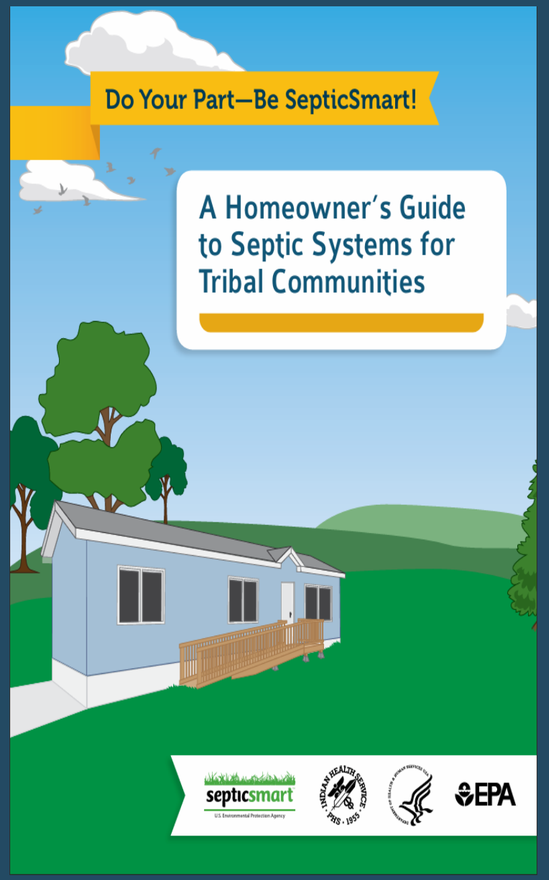


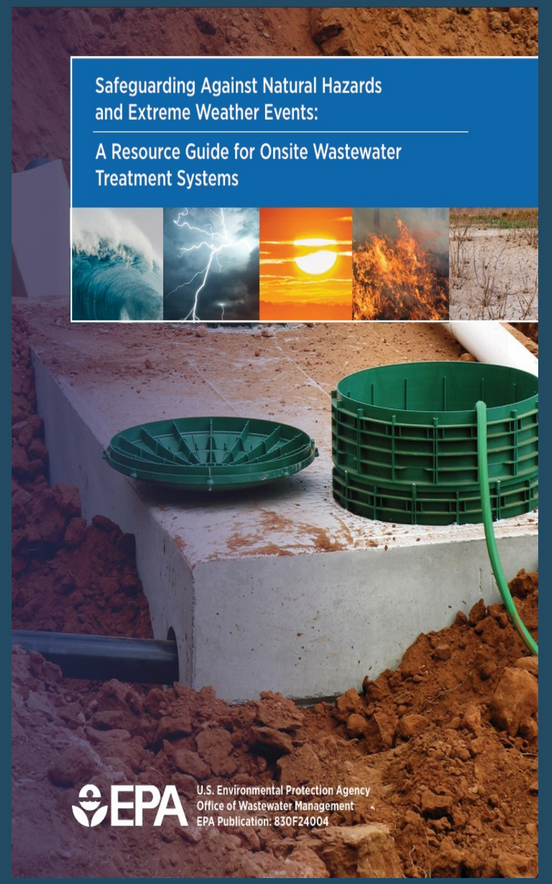
Septic Question in the new ACS.

Updated/New Septic System Resources

- EPA collaborated with IHS to develop a new version of the SepticSmart Homeowner's Guide to reflect the unique needs of Tribal communities.

- EPA developed a resource guide to help communities and homeowners safeguard onsite systems from extreme weather events.





MOU Partnership Priorities | 2026-2029



LEVERAGE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO ADDRESS COMMUNITIES' DECENTRALIZED INFRASTRUCTURE & TECHNOLOGY NEEDS

Increase the number of decentralized communities receiving technical assistance for the design, construction, and financing of properly functioning and sustainable wastewater systems, including the use of innovative treatment solutions in challenging terrains.



SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTAL & PUBLIC HEALTH OUTCOMES BY INCREASING PUBLIC AWARENESS OF SEPTIC SYSTEM MAINTENANCE & MANAGEMENT

Increase water quality improvements through homeowner education on the importance of septic system maintenance and expand the options or prototypes for alternative management structures.



UTILIZE DECENTRALIZED DATA TO INFORM DECENTRALIZED INFRASTRUCTURE & WORKFORCE PRIORITIES

Utilize federal and MOU partner networks to collect, analyze and apply varying types of decentralized system data to understand trends in usage and workforce needs.



SepticSmart Week

2026 Highlights

September 14-18, 2026

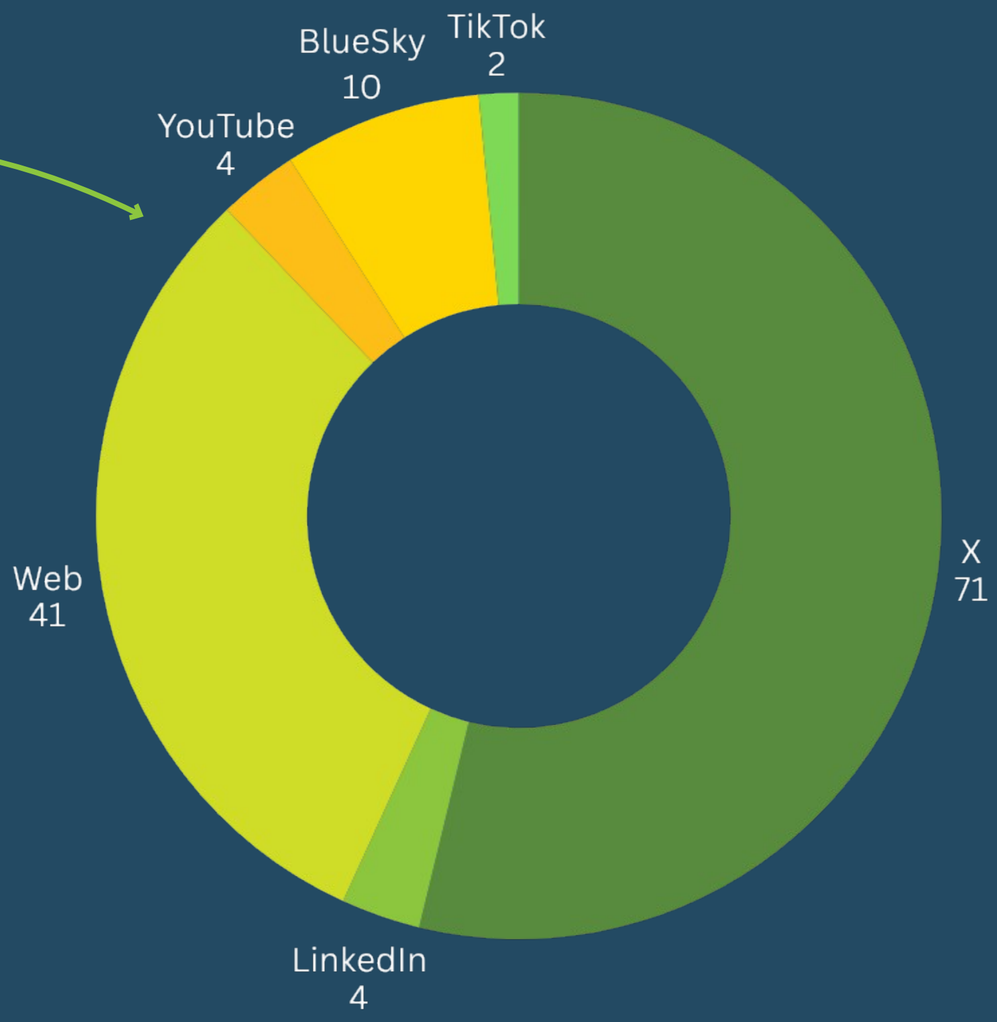
https://www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart-week

SepticSmart Socials

479 mentions
across social platforms

482 interactions
likes, comments, reshares, etc.

1 million reached
social media accounts reached



EPA Website Traffic

Total Page Views	2026	2025
Avg Weekly Views: Jan-August	8,400	10,262
SepticSmart Week Views	**9,623**	10,368

+14.5% increase in web traffic during SepticSmart Week 2026 compared to the preceding months of 2026

9 Proclamations

5
states



Idaho



Michigan



New Mexico



North Carolina



Washington

1
municipality

TOWN OF NAGS HEAD

3
professional organizations

NOWRA

astho™

NAWT
National Association of Wastewater Technicians

EPA Press Release

EPA's 14th SepticSmart Week: Practical and Proactive Septic System Maintenance Protects Public Health & Reduces Costs

September 14, 2026

Contact Information
EPA Press Office (press@epa.gov)

WASHINGTON – Today, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) kicked off SepticSmart Week 2026, a nationwide effort to help homeowners properly maintain their septic systems to protect public health, groundwater, local waterways, and the environment while saving American families money. SepticSmart Week 2026 takes place September 14-18, 2026, marking the program's 14th year of promoting practical and responsible septic system care.

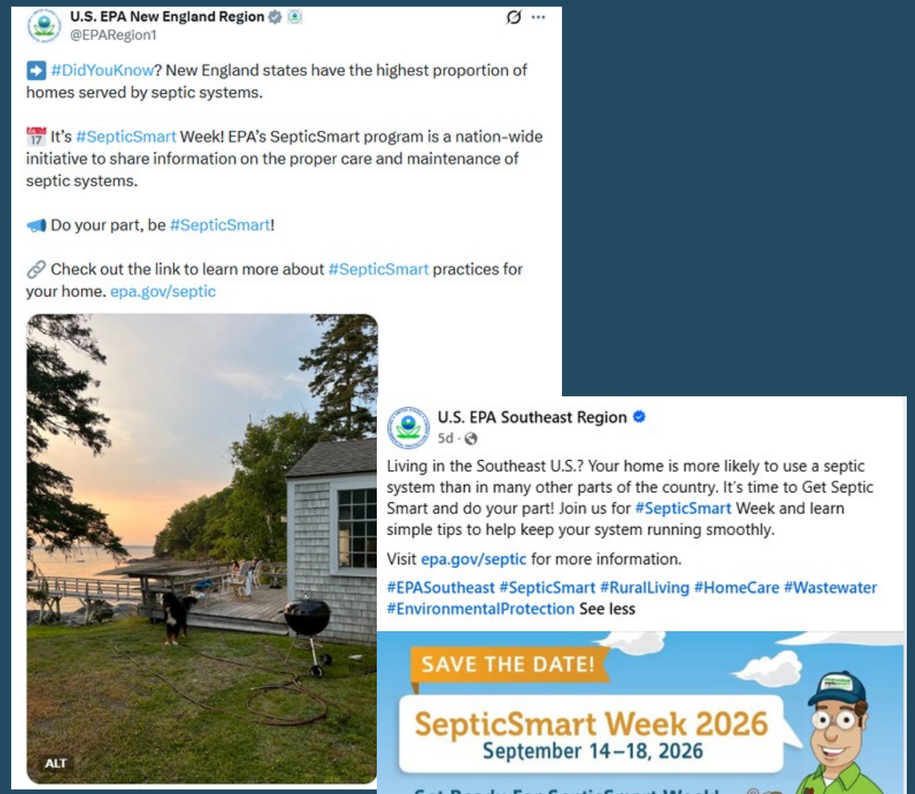
"More than one in five homes across the country relies on septic systems to safely manage wastewater. That number is even higher in rural and suburban communities that are the backbone of this great nation," **said EPA Assistant Administrator for Water Jess Kramer.** *"EPA's SepticSmart tips provide homeowners with practical strategies to keep their families and communities safe. At the same time, these tips can avoid costly repairs, keeping more money in the pocketbooks of American families."*

Failure to maintain a septic system can lead to sewage backups, contamination of drinking water sources, expensive repairs, and environmental damage. Regular inspections and preventative maintenance are often less costly than replacing a failed system.

EPA's SepticSmart program provides homeowners, local governments, and community organizations with resources and tools to strengthen understanding of how septic systems work and how routine maintenance protects public health while reducing repair costs and extending system life. During the week, EPA and its partners will share educational materials, host outreach events, and promote best practices for septic system operation and maintenance.

The last SepticSmart Week public press release from EPA was in 2024.

EPA Socials



EPA Region 1

EPA Region 4



EPA Region 6



EPA Region 8

SepticSmart Week Activity Book

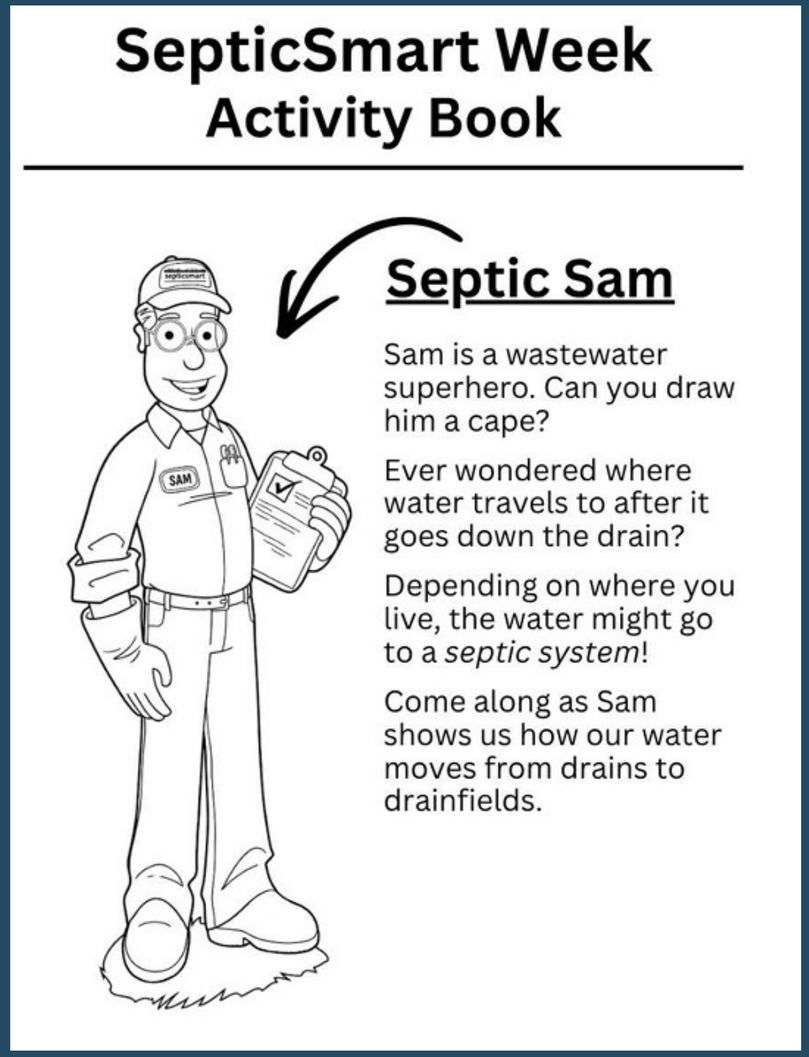
NEW Featured Resource

The 2026 SepticSmart Steering Group guided the development of a new SepticSmart Week Activity Book featuring:

- Puzzles
- Word searches
- Interactive activities
- SepticSmart tips

Shared by the following entities:

- **Illinois State Water Survey at University of Illinois**
- **Washington Department of Health**
- **South Carolina Department of Environmental Services**



Community Events

- **Bennington County Conservation District and Septic Education for Everyone** in Rutland, Vermont hosted a wastewater workshop on Wednesday, 9/16.

- The **IHS Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE)** in Sisseton, South Dakota partnered with local Tribal utility staff to promote SepticSmart Week through an educational display at a local healthcare center.

- **Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District and Geauga Public Health** in Geauga, **Ohio** held a “Get SepticSmart” workshop on Tuesday, 9/22.

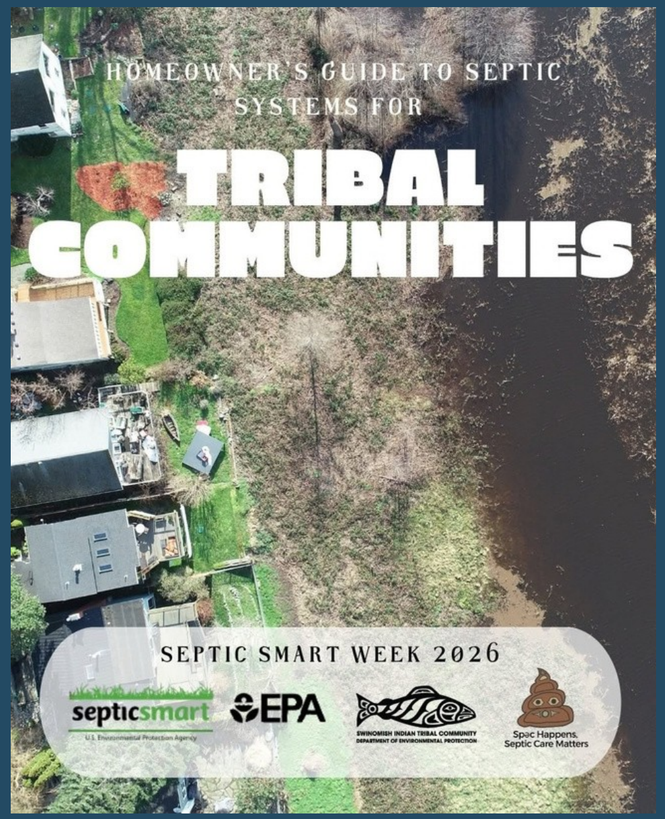


Virtual Events

- **NOWRA** hosted a SepticSmart Week webinar for homeowners on Monday, 9/14
- **The University of Minnesota Onsite Sewage Treatment Program** hosted a “Being SepticSmart” webinar on Tuesday, 9/15.
- **Missouri Smallflows Organization** held a SepticSmart Week webinar on Wednesday, 9/16.
- **RCAP** hosted a “Septic System Basics for Homeowners” webinar on Tuesday, 9/22.



Customized Outreach



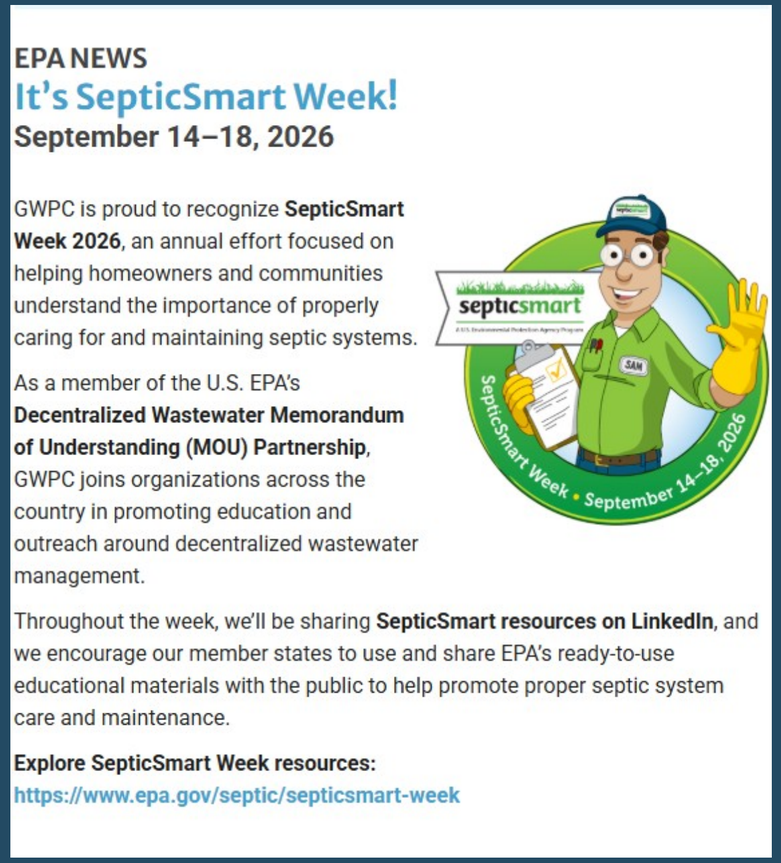
Swinomish Department of Environmental Protection (Washington), customized and shared the Homeowners Guide to Septic Systems for Tribal Communities, developed by EPA and IHS.



Environmental Finance Center Network celebrated SepticSmart Week by designing SepticSmart Week stickers and distributing them to nonprofit organizations and local governments.

MOU Partner Efforts

- **NAWT** developed a SepticSmart Week dedicated page on their website, highlighting resources.
- **International Code Council** published an article highlighting SepticSmart Week, which was also featured in their weekly newsletter, reaching an audience of over 28,000 subscribers.
- **Ground Water Protection Council** featured SepticSmart Week in the September issue of their newsletter.



EPA NEWS

It's SepticSmart Week!

September 14–18, 2026

GWPC is proud to recognize **SepticSmart Week 2026**, an annual effort focused on helping homeowners and communities understand the importance of properly caring for and maintaining septic systems.

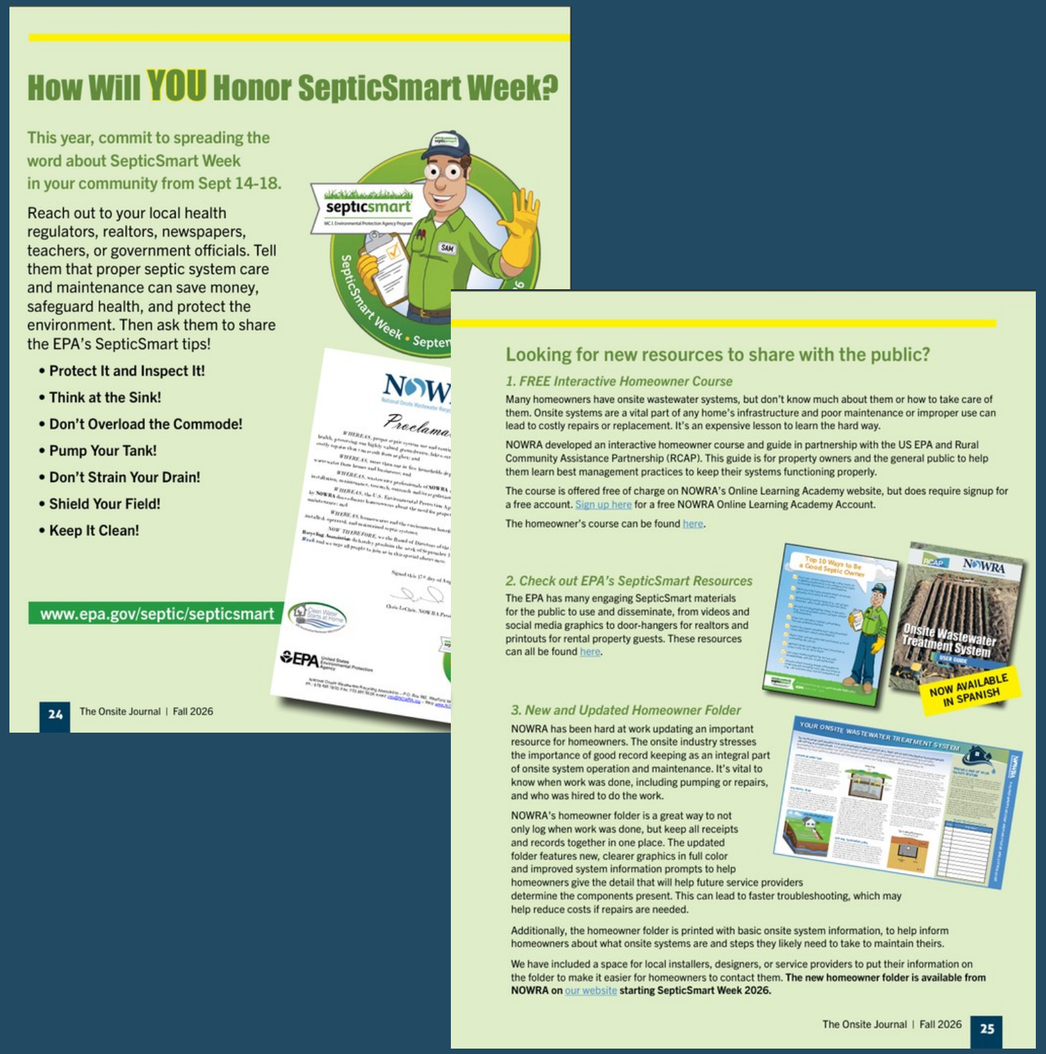
As a member of the U.S. EPA's **Decentralized Wastewater Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Partnership**, GWPC joins organizations across the country in promoting education and outreach around decentralized wastewater management.

Throughout the week, we'll be sharing **SepticSmart resources on LinkedIn**, and we encourage our member states to use and share EPA's ready-to-use educational materials with the public to help promote proper septic system care and maintenance.

Explore SepticSmart Week resources:
https://www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart-week

MOU Partner Efforts (cont.)

- **IAPMO** shared EPA SepticSmart graphics via LinkedIn.
- **NRWA** designed and shared their own SepticSmart graphics across social media.
- **NORWA** featured SepticSmart Week in their magazine and newsletter and shared a new resource on their website: “Homeowner’s Onsite System Guide and Record Keeping Folder”.
- **USDA Rural Development** highlighted funding opportunities for replacing and repairing failing septic systems on social media.



How Will YOU Honor SepticSmart Week?

This year, commit to spreading the word about SepticSmart Week in your community from Sept 14-18.

Reach out to your local health regulators, realtors, newspapers, teachers, or government officials. Tell them that proper septic system care and maintenance can save money, safeguard health, and protect the environment. Then ask them to share the EPA’s SepticSmart tips!

- Protect It and Inspect It!
- Think at the Sink!
- Don’t Overload the Commode!
- Pump Your Tank!
- Don’t Strain Your Drain!
- Shield Your Field!
- Keep It Clean!

www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart

24 The Onsite Journal | Fall 2026

Looking for new resources to share with the public?

1. FREE Interactive Homeowner Course

Many homeowners have onsite wastewater systems, but don’t know much about them or how to take care of them. Onsite systems are a vital part of any home’s infrastructure and poor maintenance or improper use can lead to costly repairs or replacement. It’s an expensive lesson to learn the hard way.

NOWRA developed an interactive homeowner course and guide in partnership with the US EPA and Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP). This guide is for property owners and the general public to help them learn best management practices to keep their systems functioning properly.

The course is offered free of charge on NOWRA’s Online Learning Academy website, but does require signup for a free account. Sign up here for a free NOWRA Online Learning Academy Account.

The homeowner’s course can be found here.

2. Check out EPA’s SepticSmart Resources

The EPA has many engaging SepticSmart materials for the public to use and disseminate, from videos and social media graphics to door-hangers for realtors and printouts for rental property guests. These resources can all be found here.

3. New and Updated Homeowner Folder

NOWRA has been hard at work updating an important resource for homeowners. The onsite industry stresses the importance of good record keeping as an integral part of onsite system operation and maintenance. It’s vital to know when work was done, including pumping or repairs, and who was hired to do the work.

NOWRA’s homeowner folder is a great way to not only log when work was done, but keep all receipts and records together in one place. The updated folder features new, clearer graphics in full color and improved system information prompts to help homeowners give the detail that will help future service providers determine the components present. This can lead to faster troubleshooting, which may help reduce costs if repairs are needed.

Additionally, the homeowner folder is printed with basic onsite system information, to help inform homeowners about what onsite systems are and steps they likely need to take to maintain theirs.

We have included a space for local installers, designers, or service providers to put their information on the folder to make it easier for homeowners to contact them. **The new homeowner folder is available from NOWRA on our website starting SepticSmart Week 2026.**

The Onsite Journal | Fall 2026 25

SepticSmart Podcasts



Environmental Finance Center Network's *The EFCN Podcast* highlighted how the Clean Water State Revolving Fund helps communities address failing septic systems and protect local water quality in Arkansas.



Montgomery County (Maryland) Government's *Department of Permitting Podcast* discussed the basics of maintaining a septic system.

Instagram

spotlighted posts



Brevard County (Florida) shared a “quick quiz” on septic care.



Musconetcong Watershed Association (New Jersey) shared advice inspired by EPA’s call to “Shield Your Field”.



Ocean Sewage Alliance shared a carousel of posts sharing tips on protecting septic systems.

Facebook

spotlighted posts



Mount Pleasant Waterworks (South Carolina) shared detailed infographics on septic system maintenance.



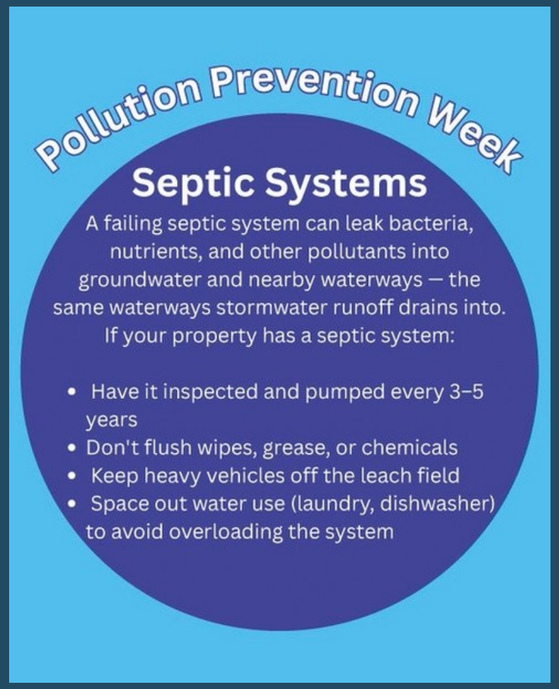
Washington State Department of Ecology shared engaging graphics with helpful tips.



The Health Department of Northwest Michigan shared helpful septic system tips.

X (Twitter)

spotlighted posts



The Town of Wellesley Department of Public Works (Massachusetts) shared tips for preventing pollution from septic systems.



Think Blue Connecticut River shared their own innovative graphics for SepticSmart Week.



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services shared information on the importance of maintaining septic systems.

News

spotlighted stories



Hawaii local media spotlighted SepticSmart Week and shared EPA septic system tips.



Summit County, **Colorado**, issued a public press release.



A Central **Illinois** news outlet featured a septic maintenance interview with the McLean County Health Department.



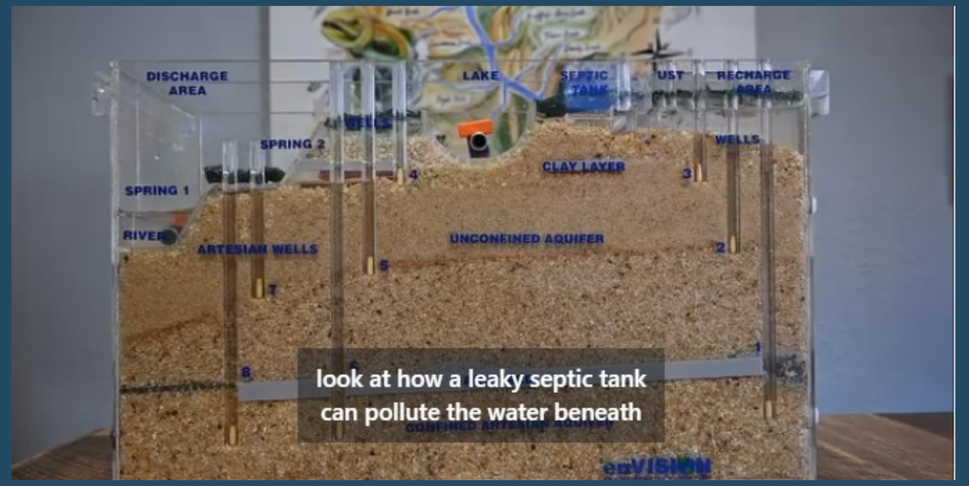
A Killeen-Fort Hood, **Washington** outlet featured article on septic maintenance tips.

YouTube, Reels, TikToks

spotlighted videos



University of Georgia Extension produced Reels providing helpful tips on maintaining septic systems.



Gallatin River Task Force (Montana) shared a video demonstrating how unmaintained septic systems can contaminate groundwater.



Loudon County Health Department (Virginia) shared an informational Reel on finding drainfields.

CWSRF Supplemental Appropriation for Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the Hawai'i Wildfires (SA-HMW): Decentralized

$85 Million for Decentralized Wastewater Hurricane Recovery

EPA United States Environmental Protection Agency

Office of Water

CWSRF SA-HMW Decentralized

- In 2025, $82 Million of CWSRF supplemental capitalization grants were directed specifically for decentralized wastewater systems
  - 100% additional subsidy provided
- The recipients
  - Must be eligible for SRF funding
  - Must have been impacted by Hurricanes Helene or Milton
- The projects must
  - Improve the **resilience** of decentralized wastewater treatment systems to flooding, or
  - Assess the potential to connect homes served by decentralized wastewater treatment systems to centralized wastewater systems, or
  - Fund connections from homes served by decentralized wastewater treatment systems to centralized wastewater treatment systems

CWSRF SA-HMW Decentralized

State	Total Allotment	Notes
NC	$22,510,000	Funded 2 sewer extension projects; 1 cluster system project; and 4 septic repair programs, including 2 revolving loan programs
GA	$8,956,000	IUP developed; PPL published
TN	$3,524,000	PPL in development
FL	$35,950,000	Funding septic-to-sewer connections
SC	$9,404,000	Funding septic-to-sewer connections
VA	$1,636,000	Funding septic-to-sewer connections
WV	*TA Only*	$200k administrative Funds for TA

CWSRF SA-HMW Decentralized

- EPA utilized $3 million administrative funding for technical assistance to states since most do not fund decentralized wastewater systems owned by individuals

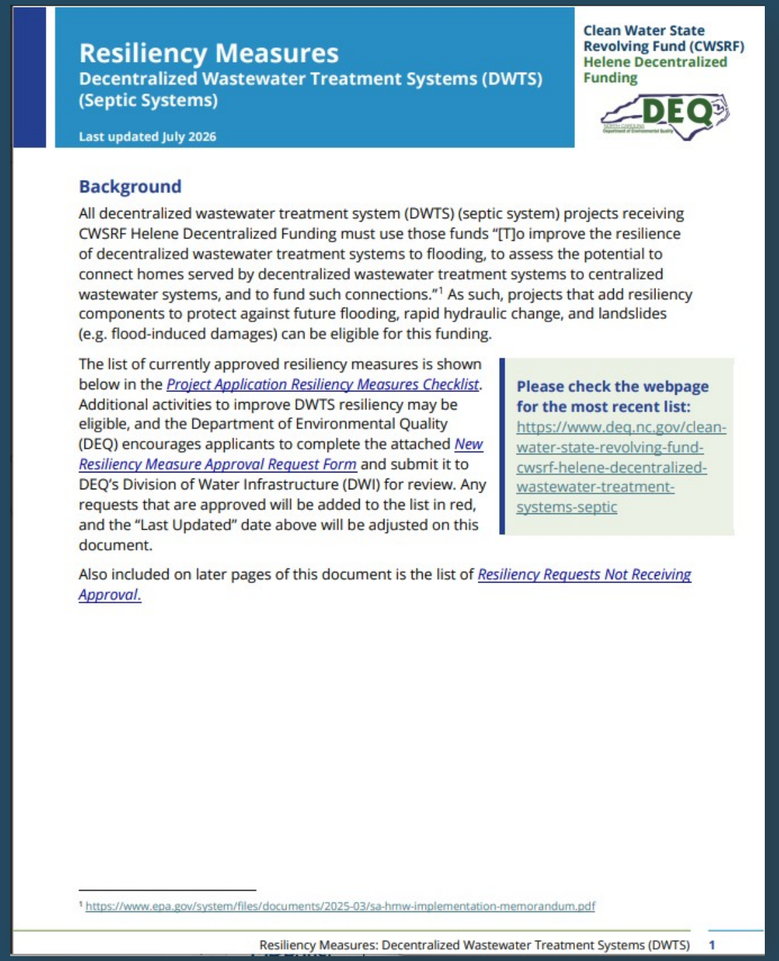
- NC using assistance to stand up “pass-through” lending
  - Eligible borrowers receive loans to provide financial assistance to individual owners of decentralized wastewater systems for eligible projects

- Pass-through entities will continue to provide a financial means for those without access to centralized wastewater treatment to repair systems and reduce flooding risk into the future

CWSRF SA-HMW Decentralized

Technical Assistance Provided:

- **NC**
  - Understanding federal requirements with SA-HMW funds
  - Developing guidance to help awardees comply with federal requirements
  - Assist awardees with mapping and program implementation
- **GA**
  - Outreach to potential applicants and assist entities with mapping and funding applications
- **WV**
  - Assisting Mercer County in developing PER to upgrade wastewater treatment plant



Resiliency Measures
Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems (DWTS) (Septic Systems)
Last updated July 2026

Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) Helene Decentralized Funding

DEQ

Background

All decentralized wastewater treatment system (DWTS) (septic system) projects receiving CWSRF Helene Decentralized Funding must use those funds "[T]o improve the resilience of decentralized wastewater treatment systems to flooding, to assess the potential to connect homes served by decentralized wastewater treatment systems to centralized wastewater systems, and to fund such connections."[1] As such, projects that add resiliency components to protect against future flooding, rapid hydraulic change, and landslides (e.g. flood-induced damages) can be eligible for this funding.

The list of currently approved resiliency measures is shown below in the *Project Application Resiliency Measures Checklist*. Additional activities to improve DWTS resiliency may be eligible, and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) encourages applicants to complete the attached *New Resiliency Measure Approval Request Form* and submit it to DEQ's Division of Water Infrastructure (DWI) for review. Any requests that are approved will be added to the list in red, and the "Last Updated" date above will be adjusted on this document.

Please check the webpage for the most recent list: https://www.deq.nc.gov/clean-water-state-revolving-fund-cwsrf-helene-decentralized-wastewater-treatment-systems-septic

Also included on later pages of this document is the list of *Resiliency Requests Not Receiving Approval.*

[1] https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2025-03/sa-hmw-implementation-memorandum.pdf

Resiliency Measures: Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems (DWTS) 1

Example NC Guidance document

Questions?

Faller.heidi@epa.gov