

News

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Suffolk County Launching Incentives And Mandates To Fight Nitrogen Pollution In Bays**UPDATED** Mar 29, 2017 10:09 AMBy [Michael Wright](#)

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone says he wants to see the county make a major shift toward nitrogen-reducing septic systems by the end of 2017, an effort that could boost the plans of Southampton and East Hampton towns as they move to mandate the use of the new systems.

On Wednesday, he was set to announce the county's first financial incentive program to encourage residents to replace aging septic systems with the latest technology. At the same time, county working groups are drafting new regulations that could be in place by the end of the year mandating the use of the new systems in new construction and whenever old systems are being replaced.

The county is also already providing training to tradesmen on how to service and monitor the new models of septic systems being approved for use in the county, according to Peter Scully, deputy county executive for administration.

"We are engaged in a multifaceted effort to set the stage for the evolution to systems that reduce nitrogen," said Mr. Scully, whom Mr. Bellone has described as the county's "clean water czar."

"It's a complicated endeavor because there are a lot of things going on at the same time," Mr. Scully said. "The county executive has been adamant that the systems are proven to be effective, which has turned out to be prudent, since two of the systems we've tested have not performed as needed. And we need to make sure there's an industry here to service them."

Nitrogen in residential septic systems has been pegged by marine scientists as the fuel for the explosion of destructive algae blooms in local bays over the last 30 years. Many homes still use systems installed in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that leach nitrogen-laden waste liquids directly into groundwater that runs into local bays.

Long criticized by environmental watchdogs as lagging far behind the rest of the country in environmental protection, Suffolk County had no nitrogen-reducing septic systems approved for use until last fall. Since Mr. Bellone, largely at the urging of South Fork officials and scientists, spurred the effort to improve water quality, the county has tested and approved three nitrogen-reducing systems, and a fourth is due to be approved shortly. In addition, 19 systems are currently undergoing testing for effectiveness in county homes and testing on another eight is to begin this spring.

The initial minimum standard for nitrogen reduction in new systems set by the Suffolk County Department of Health is 19 milligrams per liter. A standard septic rings system releases about 50 mg/l into groundwater. Officials and industry representatives have said that as the market drives innovation, systems will quickly get even better at scrubbing nitrogen from a home's wastewater, and the County Legislature has already set up protocols for regular review of the latest technology and for the Health Department to ratchet down the maximum allowable nitrogen levels as feasible.

Southampton and East Hampton towns are both drafting legislation that would mandate the use of nitrogen-reducing septic systems and crafting financial incentive programs of their own, tapping into millions in Community Preservation Fund money now available for water quality improvement projects. The county's moves, however, could make the implementation of such efforts across the 13 townships easier with the help of centralized regulating and monitoring by the County Department of Health.

At the outset the county will have field inspectors monitoring the maintenance and functioning of nitrogen reducing systems, which require annual servicing and regular monitoring to ensure that their filters are functioning properly.

As the use of the systems becomes widespread, the county plans to develop a digital monitoring system by which service companies can, and would be required to, report on

the annual maintenance of each home's system and provide data to show that it is functioning as intended.

With more than 200,000 septic systems in the county woefully outdated, the drive to bring down nitrogen levels is in its infancy, but the coming mandates and incentives, Mr. Scully said, should put substantial weight behind the evolution toward cleaner water.

"I think we've made more progress in the last of couple years than we had in the prior several decades," he said. "Nobody had been focused on these issues. Now a lot of people are focusing on this and we're going to take advantage of that focus and energy to move things along quickly."



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