

## HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF FINAL BILL ANALYSIS

**BILL #:** CS/CS/CS/HB 309 Private Provider Inspections of Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Systems

**SPONSOR(S):** State Affairs Committee; Agriculture & Natural Resources Appropriations Subcommittee; Environment, Agriculture & Flooding Subcommittee; Fetterhoff, Giallombardo and others

**TIED BILLS:** **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** CS/CS/SB 856

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**FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION:** 116 Y's      0 N's      **GOVERNOR'S ACTION:** Approved

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### SUMMARY ANALYSIS

CS/CS/CS/HB 309 passed the House on March 8, 2022, as CS/CS/SB 856.

Onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems (OSTDSs), commonly referred to as “septic systems,” generally consist of two basic parts: the septic tank and the drainfield. Waste from toilets, sinks, washing machines, and showers flows through a pipe into the septic tank, where anaerobic bacteria break the solids into a liquid form. The liquid portion of the wastewater flows into the drainfield, which is generally a series of perforated pipes or panels surrounded by lightweight materials such as gravel or Styrofoam. The drainfield provides a secondary treatment where aerobic bacteria continue deactivating the germs. The drainfield also provides filtration of the wastewater, as gravity draws the water down through the soil layers. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is responsible for conducting inspections associated with the construction, installation, maintenance, modification, abandonment, operation, use, or repair of OSTDSs for residences and certain other establishments.

The bill authorizes the owner of an OSTDS or a contractor upon the owner’s written authorization to hire a private provider to perform an inspection of the OSTDS. The bill specifies that OSTDS inspections may only be performed by certain qualified private providers or an authorized representative of a private provider and prohibits the private provider or authorized representative from inspecting an OSTDS that the private provider or authorized representative installed.

The bill authorizes DEP to audit 25 percent of private providers each year to ensure the accurate performance of OSTDS inspections. The bill clarifies that it does not prevent DEP from investigating complaints.

By October 1, 2023, the bill requires DEP to submit a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives on the use of private providers for OSTDS inspections.

The bill may have an insignificant negative fiscal impact on the state that can be absorbed within existing resources, but does not have a fiscal impact on local governments.

The bill was approved by the Governor on May 12, 2022, ch. 2022-105, L.O.F., and will become effective on July 1, 2022.

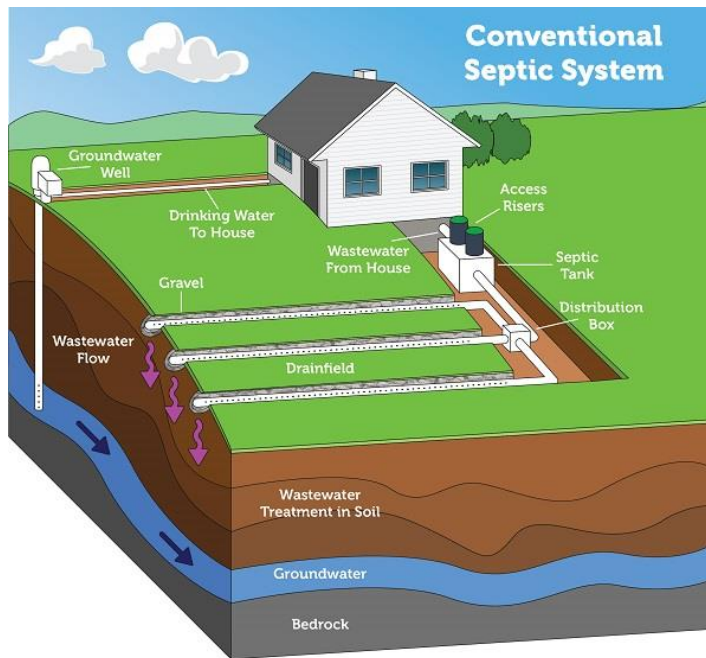
# I. SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

## A. EFFECT OF CHANGES:

### Background

#### Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Systems

Onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems (OSTDSs), commonly referred to as “septic systems,” generally consist of two basic parts: the septic tank and the drainfield.<sup>1</sup> Waste from toilets, sinks, washing machines, and showers flows through a pipe into the septic tank, where anaerobic bacteria break the solids into a liquid form. The liquid portion of the wastewater flows into the drainfield, which is generally a series of perforated pipes or panels surrounded by lightweight materials such as gravel or Styrofoam. The drainfield provides a secondary treatment where aerobic bacteria continue deactivating the germs. The drainfield also provides filtration of the wastewater, as gravity draws the water down through the soil layers.<sup>2</sup>



There are an estimated 2.6 million OSTDSs in Florida, providing wastewater disposal for 30 percent of the state’s population.<sup>3</sup> In Florida, development in some areas is dependent on OSTDSs due to the cost and time it takes to install central sewer systems.<sup>4</sup> For example, in rural areas and low-density developments, central sewer systems are not cost-effective. Less than 1 percent of OSTDSs in Florida are actively managed under operating permits and maintenance agreements.<sup>5</sup> The remainder of systems are generally serviced only when they fail, often leading to costly repairs that could have been avoided with routine maintenance.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health (DOH), *Septic System Information and Care*, <http://columbia.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/environmental-health/onsite-sewage-disposal/septic-information-and-care.html> (last visited Jan. 6, 2022); Environmental Protection Agency, *Types of Septic Systems*, <https://www.epa.gov/septic/types-septic-systems> (last visited Jan. 6, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Department of Environmental Protection, *Onsite Sewage*, <https://floridadep.gov/water/onsite-sewage> (last visited Jan. 6, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> DOH, *Report on Range of Costs to Implement a Mandatory Statewide 5-Year Septic Tank Inspection Program*, § 1.0 (Oct. 1, 2008), available at [http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/onsite-sewage/research/\\_documents/rrac/2008-11-06.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/onsite-sewage/research/_documents/rrac/2008-11-06.pdf) (last visited Jan. 6, 2022). The report begins on page 56 of the PDF.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

The Clean Waterways Act transferred the Onsite Sewage Program from the Department of Health (DOH) to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), effective July 1, 2021.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, as of July 1, 2021, DEP assumed responsibility for conducting inspections associated with the construction, installation, maintenance, modification, abandonment, operation, use, or repair of OSTDSs for residences and certain other establishments.<sup>8</sup>

### OSTDS Inspections

Regarding the installation or construction of OSTDSs, DEP's Onsite Sewage Program regulations provide that, before covering an OSTDS with earth and before placing an OSTDS into service, a person installing or constructing any portion of an OSTDS must notify DEP of the completion of construction activities and must have the system inspected by DEP for compliance with applicable regulatory requirements, except for repair installations, which may be inspected by either DEP or a master septic tank contractor under certain conditions.<sup>9</sup>

If an owner or an owner's authorized representative is proposing alterations to an existing and prior-approved OSTDS that will modify its sewage characteristics or increase sewage flow, the owner or authorized representative is required to apply for and receive reapproval of the OSTDS by DEP prior to any alteration of the OSTDS.<sup>10</sup> The owner or authorized representative must first have all system tanks pumped by a permitted septage disposal service, then have either a registered septic tank contractor, a state-licensed plumber, a certified environmental health professional, or a master tank contractor determine the tank volume and perform a visual tank inspection to detect any observable defects or leaks in the tank. The person performing the inspection must submit the results of the inspection to DEP.<sup>11</sup>

Whenever an owner or the owner's authorized representative wishes to abandon an OSTDS, the owner or the representative must apply for a permit from DEP to abandon the OSTDS and submit the required fee.<sup>12</sup> Upon receiving a permit, the tank must be pumped out by a permitted septage disposal company, unless the tank is already empty and dry, in which case a written statement to that effect must be provided to DEP. The bottom of the tank must then be opened or ruptured, or the entire tank collapsed, so as to prevent the tank from retaining water. The tank must also be filled with clean sand or other suitable material and completely covered with soil. DEP or the local utility or plumbing authority performing the system abandonment must then perform an inspection of the system abandonment.<sup>13</sup> DEP maintains a schedule of fees, including inspection fees, for the services it provides.<sup>14</sup>

### **Effect of the Bill**

Notwithstanding any other law, ordinance, or policy, the bill authorizes the owner of an OSTDS or a contractor upon the owner's written authorization to hire a private provider to perform an inspection that follows applicable regulatory requirements of the OSTDS.

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2020-150, s. 2, Laws of Fla.

<sup>8</sup> Section 381.0065(3)(b), F.S. Although DEP is now responsible for the Onsite Sewage Program, DEP and DOH have agreed that county health departments should continue to have a role in the inspection, permitting, and tracking of OSTDSs, under the direction of DEP. See DOH and DEP, *Interagency Agreement between Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Department of Health in Compliance with Florida's Clean Waterways Act for Transfer of the Onsite Sewage Program*, available at [http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/onsite-sewage/\\_documents/interagency-agreement-between-fdoh-fdep-onsite-signed-06302021.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/onsite-sewage/_documents/interagency-agreement-between-fdoh-fdep-onsite-signed-06302021.pdf) (last visited Jan. 6, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Rule 62-6.003(2), (3), F.A.C.

<sup>10</sup> Rule 62-6.001(4), (4)(b), (5), F.A.C.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Rule 62-6.011(2)(a), F.A.C. However, permitting is not necessary if a local utility or local plumbing authority performs a system abandonment program that includes completion of the other steps identified in the rule. Rule 62-6.011(3), F.A.C.

<sup>13</sup> Rule 62-6.011(2), F.A.C.

<sup>14</sup> Rule 62-6.030, F.A.C.

The bill prohibits the private provider or authorized representative of the private provider from inspecting an OSTDS that the private provider or authorized representative installed. The bill specifies that OSTDS inspections may only be performed by a private provider or an authorized representative of a private provider if they are:

- An environmental health professional certified by DOH;
- A master septic tank contractor;
- A licensed professional engineer and have passed all parts of the OSTDS accelerated certificate of training; or
- Working under the supervision of a licensed professional engineer and have passed all parts of the OSTDS accelerated certification training.

The bill requires an owner or authorized contractor using a private provider for an OSTDS inspection to provide notice to DEP at the time of the permit application or by 2 p.m. local time two business days before the first scheduled inspection by DEP. The bill requires the notice to include the following information for each authorized representative performing the inspection:

- The name and firm name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address;
- Professional license or certification number; and
- Qualification statement or resume.

Additionally, the bill requires the notice to contain an acknowledgement from the owner that states the owner or authorized contractor has elected to use a private OSTDS inspector and has made an inquiry regarding the competence of the licensed or certified private provider. The acknowledgement requires the owner or authorized contractor to agree to indemnify, defend, and hold harmless DEP from any claims arising from the use of the licensed or certified private provider identified in the application. The acknowledgement must also specify that the owner understands that in the event the OSTDS does not comply with applicable rules and law, the owner will be responsible for remediating the system in accordance with existing law.

If an owner or authorized contractor makes any changes to the listed private provider or the service to be performed by the private provider, the bill requires the owner or authorized contractor to update the notice to reflect the change within one business day after the change. The change of an authorized representative identified in the permit application does not require a revision of the permit and the department may not charge a fee for making such change.

The bill authorizes DEP to audit up to 25 percent of private providers each year to ensure the accurate performance of OSTDS inspections and specifies that it does not prevent DEP from investigating complaints. The bill allows work on a building, a structure, or an OSTDS to proceed after inspection and approval by a private provider if the owner or authorized contractor has given notice of the inspection. The bill specifies that subsequent to the inspection and approval, such work may not be delayed for the completion of an inspection audit by DEP.

The bill requires DEP to adopt rules to implement the bill and initiate rulemaking by August 31, 2022.

Additionally, by October 1, 2023, the bill requires DEP to submit a report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives on the use of private providers for OSTDS inspections. The report must include, at a minimum, the number of OSTDS inspections performed by private providers.

## **II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT**

### **A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:**

#### **1. Revenues:**

None.

2. Expenditures:

The bill may have an insignificant negative fiscal impact on DEP that can be absorbed within existing resources for the rulemaking and reporting requirements of the bill.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill would likely have a positive fiscal impact on the private sector by allowing private OSTDS inspectors to conduct OSTDS inspections.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.