

PSMA On-lot Wastewater Treatment Inspection vs. A Regulatory Inspection

The local Sewage Enforcement Officer (SEO) focuses on system malfunctions. The PSMA certified septic tank inspector focuses on the overall well being and health of your system. On the surface these two purposes may sound similar, but they are not.

Often the question is asked; *“Why did the local Sewage Enforcement Officer (SEO) state this septic system does not have a ‘Malfunction’ but the PSMA Certified inspector reported the system is ‘Unsatisfactory’?”*

Homeowners seeking to have their septic system inspected, especially during real estate transfers, are usually interested in the overall health of the system;

- is it properly located
- has it been maintained (pumped) on a regular basis
- is it working properly
- is there any evidence that the system might fail (and require replacement) in the near future, etc?

There are several practitioners a homeowner might engage to obtain reliable information;

1. the local SEO
2. a septic tank pumper
3. an independent inspector.

Independent inspectors are not very common, so most homeowners or homebuyers usually turn to the local SEO thinking this is the best and most reliable source of information. The septic tank pumper is often forgotten, or it is assumed this person is just a truck driver. What is often not realized is that

- a large majority of septic tank pumpers are well trained and Pennsylvania Septage Management Association (PSMA) certified to inspect a septic system
- SEO’s are greatly restricted in what they are permitted to tell you.

The SEO focuses on system malfunctions. The PSMA certified septic tank inspector focuses on the overall well-being and health of your system. On the surface these two purposes may sound similar, but they are not.

Sewage Enforcement Officer (SEO) Inspection

SEO’s are agents of the local municipality, hired by the municipality to administer the PA-DEP regulations set forth in Title 25 Chapters 71, 72, and 73 of the PA code. Much of an SEO’s responsibility is focused on permitting and overseeing the installation of new on-lot sewage systems. When it comes to inspections of an on-lot sewage system, the SEO is taught that there is no violation unless the system malfunctions.

Therefore, according to an SEO, your system is not malfunctioning unless there is observable wastewater emerging onto the land surface or the sewage has backed up into the home.

PSMA Certified Inspection

PSMA Certified Inspectors, which includes most septic tank pumpers, are trained to understand how on-lot systems work, why they fail, and recognize impending malfunctions. They are taught how to examine a septic tank and make sure the baffles and pipes are correctly placed and functioning.

A certification exam must be passed before they receive the PSMA Inspector Certification. When a PSMA Inspector checks out a septic system, he/she will examine the various parts of the system to make sure all necessary components are in place and in good shape. The PSMA inspector will also estimate your actual water usage and look for water ponded in the absorption field and other evidences that may signal a system that may soon fail or need extensive maintenance or replacement. These inspection standards have not been developed by PA-DEP or any other governing agency. The PSMA inspection procedures have been developed in co-operation with The Pennsylvania State University, with SEO’s, and with other professionals in the industry. The Commonwealth courts, County courts, and Local courts have recognized them as the industry standard during proceedings with real-estate inspection issues. **The PSMA Certified Inspection report will provide sound evidence regarding the overall condition of the system and a sound estimate about whether problems can be expected in the near future, not just whether it has failed.**

The differences between the two inspections can be explained by the following analogy: If you were to go buy a car and want it to be legal, you would check for a state inspection to



see if it complied with the state laws. But if you would like to know how good the car is, if there is much useful life to it, and if there are any hidden problems not checked in a state inspection, you would have a mechanic inspect the car completely. A comprehensive inspection may reveal a slight engine knock, misfire or smoking exhaust, which are concerns of possible failure. The latter conditions are synonymous to the case when an absorption area (drainfield) is excessively saturated with wastewater.

Wastewater may not be rising to the soil surface causing a regulatory 'Malfunction' but when the crushed stones (aggregate) are full of liquid and sludge, it is only a matter of time until the liquid will discharge on the surface or create a backup. If you are anticipating a real estate transaction, especially buying a home, it is to your advantage to have the on-lot sewage system inspected. For more information about PSMA/NOF inspections go to the [Pennsylvania Septage Management Association](#) website.

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