



Opinion

Guest Comment

New septic legislation would create jobs

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Requiring nitrogen-removing technology for all new septic systems in Maryland will not only help the environment by reducing the amount of nitrogen entering our waterways, it will also create jobs. Legislation requiring this technology for all new septic systems in the state will be debated in the 2012 Maryland General Assembly.

In 2009, Maryland passed legislation mandating nitrogen-removing septic systems for all construction in the Critical Area (land within 1,000 feet of tidal waters). John Short is the project manager for Towers Concrete Products Inc., out of Denton. Towers Concrete hired six people to keep up with the work generated as a direct result of this legislation.

According to Short, the legislation gave local septic system installers and maintenance companies more business and actually kept some companies from closing their doors.

"I know of at least one local construction company that didn't have any work building houses, so instead of closing down they switched to installing nitrogen-removing septic systems to stay afloat until more construction work came along" Short said. When asked if the potential new legislation would have a positive impact on his business, Short replied, "definitely."

The legislation has other positive impacts in addition to creating jobs and improving the environment: nitrogen-removing systems do not have to be pumped out as often as traditional systems and there is less material to pump. This means less stress on local wastewater treatment plants and fewer trucks on the roads. Nitrogen removing systems also extend the life of drain fields by about 50 percent. Regular drain fields last between 20 and 30 years; a drain field on nitrogen-removing technology will last 30 to 45 years, deferring that replacement cost.

Harry Harrison, owner of Queen Anne's and Kent County-based Harrison Septics, also saw increased work from the 2009 Critical Area legislation, and predicts further job creation with passage of the proposed legislation. According to Harrison, requiring nitrogen-removing systems "definitely creates jobs. We put systems in where normally the homeowners wouldn't be able to, all because some of it is paid for by the Bay Restoration Fund."

Harrison added that the county health departments are working hard to make sure that homeowners get the best technology for their particular site.

Harrison stressed that funding is essential to his continued ability to install nitrogen-removing systems. "Look at what you get for that small amount of money you pay [into the Bay Restoration Fund]. Nobody likes raising taxes, but the amount they might raise it by is a drop in the bucket compared to the total amount of taxes you pay every year. I would increase that flush tax a little more and then be able to pay for everybody to put in nitrogen-removing systems." Asked if the potential new legislation would create jobs, Harrison replied, "of course it will."

The recent recession has negatively impacted the construction industry. The U.S. Department of Labor puts the national unemployment rate at 9 percent, and at 13.7 percent for construction workers. Many opponents to environmental regulations predict job loss as a consequence of increased restrictions. However, legislation requiring nitrogen-removing septic systems everywhere in the state provides an opportunity to support the economy in rural Maryland and contradicts the "war on rural Maryland" rhetoric. This is just one example of an environmental regulation that will, in fact, create jobs.

(Isabel Junkin is the policy director for the Chester River Association)

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