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Environmental Case Study—Onsite Wastewater Systems:
BUNCOMBE COUNTY STRAIGHT PIPE
ELIMINATION & SEPTIC REPAIR PROGRAM
Prepared May 2004¹

Jurisdiction:	Buncombe County
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Funding, Administration & Other Organizations:	Land-of-Sky Regional Council; DENR's Wastewater Discharge Elimination program (WaDE); Buncombe County Health Center; Mountain Housing Opportunities, Inc.; and USDA Rural Development.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPETUS

The 1990 U.S. Census revealed an astonishing 49,000 North Carolinians had self-reported their lack of sewer or septic systems to deal with household wastewater disposal. In the mountains, the practice of siting homes near streams to carry off wastewater is often due to the lack of appropriate land for septic drainfields and poverty. As late as 1970, homes were still being constructed without septic installation permits.

In 1994, the town of Weaverville in northern Buncombe County applied for a permit to construct a water treatment plant along the Ivy River. Mandatory water testing revealed high fecal coliform levels. As the town struggled to resolve the issue, Governor Jim Hunt established a goal of eliminating the straight piping of untreated wastewater into the streams and rivers of western North Carolina. These issues coincided with the 1995 Year of the Mountains, when state leaders met to address concerns specific to the mountainous region of western North Carolina.

In 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly voted to create a new program—the Wastewater Discharge Elimination program (WaDE)—to identify and eliminate straight pipes and failing septic systems in watersheds statewide. WaDE reported that many homes relied on outhouses, and incomplete indoor facilities. The programs in Madison and Buncombe Counties spun off WaDE's survey work on the Ivy River.

DESCRIPTION

The Buncombe County Straight Pipe Elimination and Septic Repair Program began in 1999 as a partnership to eliminate the practice of straight piping and to repair failing septic systems in Buncombe County. The partnership launched the Buncombe Environmental Health Survey Project. Field teams surveyed wastewater conditions of households in the Ivy River Watershed, and offered face-to-face education on septic systems, maintenance, and repair requirements. The survey has since expanded into the Pearl Street community in Black

¹ **Note:** Information for the case study was gathered from interviews and reference materials during spring 2004 and is subject to change. For the latest information, the reader should contact the organizations. Case study prepared by: Adrienne Simonson, M.P.A.; asimonson@nc.rr.com.

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Mountain, Wooten Cove in Weaverville, Brickyard Road in Emma, and Surrett Cove in Sandy Mush.

Each survey, conducted by WaDE field teams, begins with a media blitz to inform community homeowners of the project. Public service announcements on local radio stations, flyers and posters in survey areas, and any other available advertising avenue is utilized. Community meetings are held in local fire stations or schools to educate citizens on wastewater disposal, septic systems, and survey goals. WaDE operates as an independent Health Department, surveying door-to-door in targeted areas, and issuing permits for corrective work on failing septic systems. WaDE funds local health departments \$100-\$150 per permit issued, since verifying the corrected systems increases the work load on local Environmental Health Specialists.

The partnership and project team works closely with homeowners and renters to offer direct septic system and household repair resources by dividing the need according to each organization's priorities. While the partnership sounds complicated, representatives from each organization meet on a quarterly basis to determine which organization is best suited to solve the particular problems raised by each homeowner application. Consideration is given to which "product" can best meet the needs of the family involved, including additional projects beyond septic system repair. Land-of-Sky Regional Council staff qualify applicants, track each project through to health certification, pay the invoice, and report to WaDE; the Regional Council is then reimbursed for funds paid to contractors. Some funding has been provided by the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) and more recently, EPA Clean Water Section 319(h) grants—restricted to French Broad River counties—through WaDE.

Grants and deferred forgivable loans are offered through Land-of-Sky Regional Council's Straight Pipe Elimination and Septic Repair Program, Mountain Housing Opportunities' Emergency Home Repair program, and USDA's Rural Development 504 Repair and Improvement Program. Property must be owner occupied for all three funding programs. Other qualifying criteria are restrictions on household income; no grants are offered to homeowners with incomes above 80% median income. No loan fees are charged.

Eligibility for Land-of-Sky's program requires household income at or below 115% of the Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Metropolitan Sewerage Areas (MSA) Income Limits. Forgivable deferred loans are available up to \$4,000 for households with income between 80% and 115% MSA. Grants up to \$4,000 are available for households at or below 80% MSA.

Mountain Housing Opportunities offers grants to homeowners 60 years or older; handicapped or disabled; single parents/guardians with small dependent children; or a situation in which five or more people live in a household which includes small dependent children. Liquid assets of the household cannot exceed \$5,000. Land assets must not exceed ten acres. Also, land that is not occupied by the owner and has a tax value of more than \$50,000 (not including a house) is not eligible for the program. Gross annual household income must be below limits established for the program, which vary from year to year.

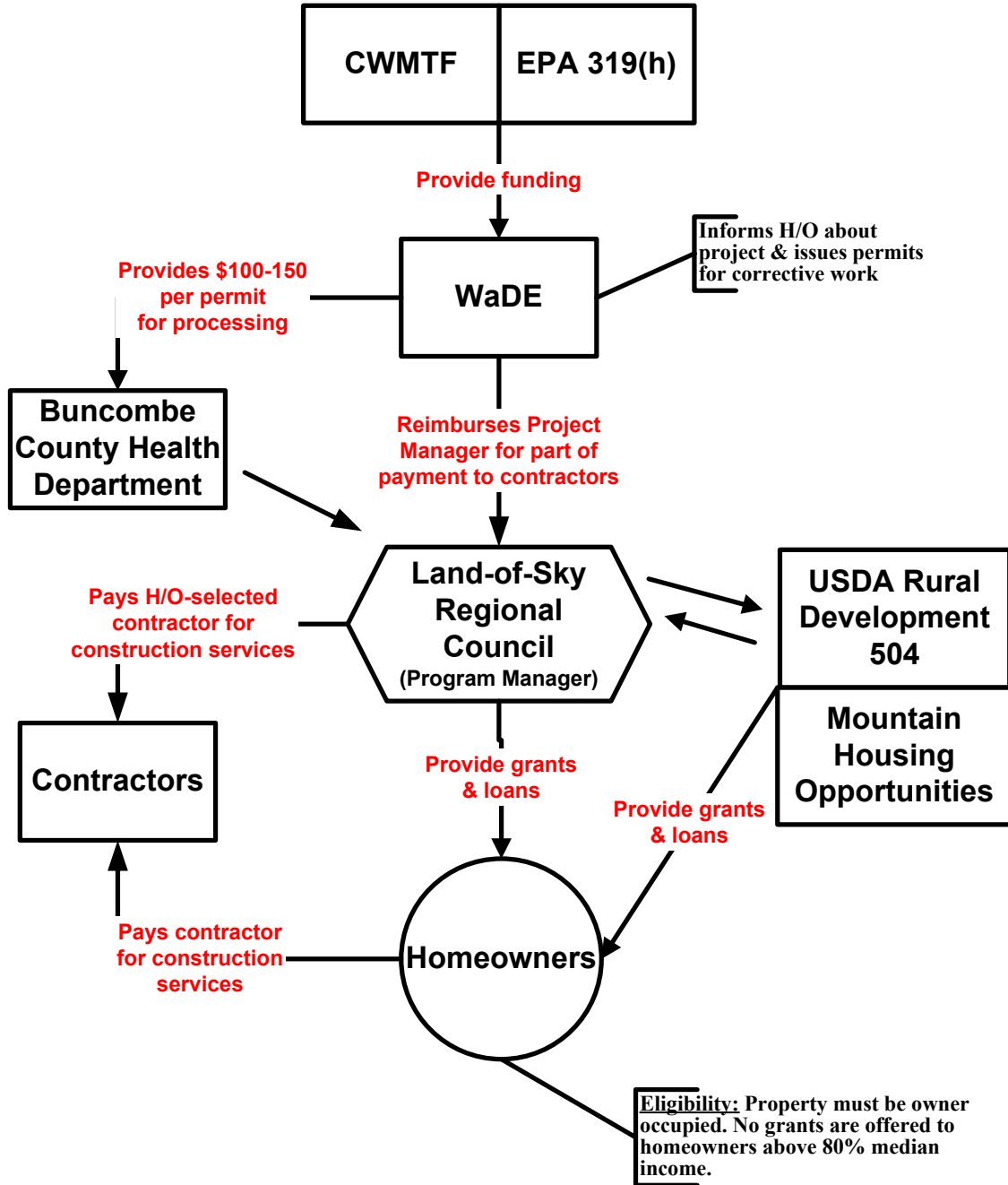
The USDA 504 Repair and Improvement Program provides loans at a maximum of \$20,000 for a maximum of 20 years at 1%. Participants must agree to liens for loans over \$7,500. Homeowners must be able to show repayment ability and have adequate credit, as well as show a reasonable willingness to meet their credit obligations. Grants are available for homeowners 62 years of age or older who cannot afford to repay a loan. Eligible adjusted family income limits range from one person at \$17,350 to 8 persons at \$32,750.

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Figure 1 shows how the funds are distributed between the organizations and provided to the homeowners.

Figure 1

**BUNCOMBE COUNTY STRAIGHT PIPE
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Funding Flow Chart**



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RESULTS

The Buncombe County partnership collaboration repaired 13 septic systems between June 2003 and March 2004, for a total of just \$19,000. In addition, peripheral needs were resolved by partnership organizations—such as indoor plumbing—to accompany new septic systems. Yet, despite very generous loan terms, many people are reluctant to agree to a lien. They are skeptical of the process and afraid that their land will be taken away.

Surveyors attempt to talk to families that refuse to participate, to explain that no one is there to hurt them, and to help them understand the application process and the issues involved. The Land-of-Sky Regional Council has recently submitted a proposal to NC RCAP to assist in combating this problem and to provide additional funding for the program's expansion.

As of May 2004, the program was set to expand into Henderson County, and eventually, Transylvania County. Land-of-Sky Regional Council's involvement thus reduces separate administrative efforts throughout the region. However, Land-of-Sky's region includes Madison County. While that program is currently completed, there is significant need still unresolved in Madison County. The program will be offered on an equitable rotation basis.

This issue continues to be politically sensitive, but the watersheds involved include high priority areas. Unfortunately, some corrections can cost more than the home is worth, and bringing the homes up to code, which is required, takes a large amount from available funding. However, the general consensus is that it takes less time to find funding than to force homeowners through court.