

# Towns face new septic regulations

## Nitrogen pollution a \$4B problem

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Cape Cod residents' wallets are hanging in the balance as towns decide whether to create a plan to clean up wastewater contamination, an issue that state environmentalists say has plagued the region for decades.

The Healey administration has released Cape Cod-specific regulations that look to "reverse decades of nitrogen pollution," but if a town skips over them, all of its homeowners must do costly upgrades to their septic systems in the next five years.

Communities have two years to opt into a process for a 20-year permit that would enable them to design and implement strate-

gies to reduce nitrogen pollution, such as centralized wastewater treatment and permeable reactive barrier walls.

If a specific community opts not to pursue such a permit, homeowners may have to fork over tens of thousands for their own septic upgrades. Officials, however, say that is not a likely outcome.

Julian Cyr, state senator for Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, said earlier this year that most communities already met the regulations, released this week, by working on what the state dubs as 'Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plans'.

Gov. Maura Healey, in a release, said her administration will continue collaborating with Cape officials

and the Legislature on ways to financially support communities as they implement the regulations.

"Nitrogen pollution is one of the most pressing environmental and economic problems facing Cape Cod," the governor said. "I'm grateful for our administration's partnership with Cape communities to develop an innovative path forward to restore and protect some of Massachusetts' most precious water resources."

Nitrogen pollution is estimated to be a \$4 billion problem that stems from outdated septic systems and cesspools currently used on the Cape. These systems have long allowed nitrogen from wastewater to seep into the region's watersheds

Eutrophic, or over-nourished, waters cause toxic algae blooms — mucking up

the water, choking off other marine life and killing the ecosystem.

About 90% of the region's embayments were ranked at an "unacceptable" level of nitrogen pollution last year, up from 68% in 2019, according to data from the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

"These regulations represent a milestone in the decades-long efforts to restore the water resources of Cape Cod," APCC Executive Director Andrew Gottlieb said in a release. "These rules empower and encourage watershed and town scale solutions and are in the best interests of Cape Cod taxpayers and all who treasure Cape Cod's water."

Communities that choose not to obtain a watershed permit will also be required to "include enhanced nitrogen reducing treatment technology" in new septic

systems under the new regulations.

Initially, the South Coast and Islands were going to follow the regulations, but after public feedback during the drafting process, the state determined those regions "have not had the same time [as the Cape] to investigate and plan to address nutrient pollution."

Healey earlier this year filed a package that included increased tax rebates of up to \$12,000 for homeowners that undertake upgrades to their septic systems. The legislation remains in the works.

"The Cape and Islands legislative delegation remains committed to continuing to bring financial resources to Cape Codders to fund wastewater solutions," Cyr said in a release. "These efforts are critical to safeguard our region's fragile natural environment."