Frequently Asked Questions

The Bay Restoration Fund

What is the Bay Restoration Fund (BRF)?
The Bay Restoration Fund was established by Senate Bill 320 (Bay Restoration Fund) and signed into law on May 26, 2004. According to studies, the Chesapeake Bay has experienced a decline in water quality due to over-enrichment of nutrients (mainly phosphorus and nitrogen). Effluent from wastewater treatment plants, residential on-site (septic) disposal systems (OSDS), and agricultural practices are the top three major contributors of nutrients entering the Bay.

The bill created a dedicated fund, financed by wastewater treatment plants and onsite disposal system users, to upgrade Maryland's municipal and residential treatment systems. Funds are also used to implement cover crop management to reduce nitrogen loading to the Bay. The signing of this bill initiated Maryland's efforts to further reduce nitrogen and phosphorus loading in the Bay by over 7.5 million pounds of nitrogen per year and over 260 thousand pounds of phosphorus per year, which represent over one-third of Maryland's commitment under the Chesapeake Bay 2000 Agreement.

A $30 annual fee is collected from each home served by an individual onsite septic system. The total estimated program income is $12 million per year. Sixty percent of these funds are used for septic system upgrades and the remaining 40 percent are used for cover crops.

There are approximately 420,000 onsite systems in Maryland. With priority given to failing septic systems in Critical Areas, funds can be provided for upgrades of existing systems to best available technology (BAT) for nitrogen removal instead of conventional technology.

Calvert County residents are encouraged to apply for the grant to upgrade their onsite septic system.

Why should we upgrade our septic system?
Conventional septic systems, with a drain field or seepage pit, are not designed to remove nitrogen. Scientists have shown that nitrogen and phosphorus pollution are the greatest threats facing the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. With over 140 miles of shoreline, Calvert County has a special interest in using nitrogen-reducing technology to treat sewage. The BRF grant provides financial and technical assistance to upgrade your outdated and ineffective septic tank with the Best Available Technology (also known as a pretreatment system) and to help reduce nitrogen by at least 50%. Some studies have shown that pretreatment systems produce cleaner wastewater, which may extend the life of your drain field. Everyone "produces" nitrogen which will eventually enter the Bay or other waterways. Nitrogen is a fertilizer and it's known to increase the production of algal blooms which removes oxygen in the waterways and is responsible for fish kills.

How does a nitrogen-reducing system work?
A nitrogen-reducing system consists of the advanced pretreatment unit and the sewage disposal field. The advanced pretreatment units used in Calvert County typically replace the conventional septic tank. The units may use aeration or recirculation to promote biological action. Through this action, nitrogen is released as a harmless gas to the atmosphere. Advanced pretreatment units usually include electrical and mechanical components such as pumps, blowers, floats, alarms, diffusers and electronic control panels.

Who is eligible for the grant?
Any county property owner may apply for the grant. Priority is given to properties with failing or failed septic systems and those properties with metal septic tanks in the Critical Area (that area within 1,000 feet of tidal waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries).

Other properties, outside of the Critical Area, may be considered but only after properties with failed systems have been upgraded.

Who pays for the system?
The Maryland Department of the Environment, through the Bay Restoration Fund, has provided Calvert County government with grant funds to pay for the septic system. The County will pay the manufacturer after the system has been installed. The manufacturer will then pay the subcontractors for their work (electrical, plumbing, tank removal, installation, landscaping restoration, and other costs). The owner is not responsible for any costs, except as noted under "What is not covered by the grant" (below). The grant can not reimburse a property owner for a system that is installed without going through the grant process.

What is covered by the grant?
If your property is selected, the grant will pay for the pretreatment system, installation, electrical wiring, pre-engineering, inspection, a five-year warranty and maintenance contract, remote service monitoring and restoration landscaping to stabilize the area disturbed by the installation.

What is not covered by the grant?
While not all inclusive, the following items are not covered by the grant and the property owner is responsible for their payment:

- Health Department septic system Replacement Permit. The fee is $30.
- Any necessary sewage disposal system repair or replacement costs, aside from those mentioned above, are the responsibility of the property owner. For instance, if prior to or during the installation of the pretreatment system it's found that the drain field has failed or the distribution box is faulty; replacement or repair is at the owner's expense.
- Fees associated with repairing or replacing the septic field, seepage pit, drain pipes, and permit fees.
- Upgraded electric service: Most pretreatment systems require a dedicated 30 AMP electric service; an upgrade may be required.
- Other issues that arise during the installation process: tree removal, excessive landscaping, fence removal, or sidewalks, decks or patios that need to be removed because of their proximity to the overall septic system.
- Repair of the system due to owner neglect or abuse.
- The daily cost of electricity to operate the system and the monitoring system.

How much does the system cost to operate?
Each system operates a little differently and the cost to operate the system varies. Depending on which system is selected, the cost could be between $3 to $40 per month, however we are using systems with electric usage ranges of $3 to $10 per month.

What is the process?
Unlike other jurisdictions in Maryland, Calvert County takes the guess-work out of the process by bidding, selecting the system and paying for the installation. We don't reimburse property owners for systems installed outside of the grant; nor do we automatically select the least expensive system – we evaluate each bid to determine which system provides the greatest amount of nitrogen removal, per dollar. We also evaluate the system for site situations, for energy efficiency and overall effectiveness. The following is a list describing the process:

- Your application must be submitted to the Calvert County Department of Planning & Zoning office. If your application is submitted to the Maryland Department of the

Environment (MDE), it will eventually be rerouted to the Department of Planning and Zoning and a Calvert County application will be sent to you.

- The home owner's application is reviewed for accuracy and completeness. If additional information is needed, staff will contact the property owner.
- Staff from the Environmental Health Department and the Planning and Zoning Office will visit the applicant's property and perform a 'site evaluation' to determine if there are any installation issues. "Issues" may include a failing septic system, high ground water, limited access to the property or the work area, a zoning violation, etc. The site evaluation will be used during the bid process to assist the manufacturers in developing their bid.
- If your property doesn't have severe access issues, the county will use a pre-approved and authorized contractor and pretreatment system. We've developed a "fixed fee" system to improve the time needed to install your new system.
- After agreeing to the system, the applicant will receive a multi-page agreement between the County, the State Health Department and the applicant. The Agreement, after it's signed, will be recorded with the State Land Records at no cost to the property owner.
- The manufacturers will be advised of the property and given the owners contact information. After the manufacturer has been given the green light to proceed, they will contact the property owner, meet the owner prior to installation, if necessary and begin the installation process at a time mutually convenient to the property owners.
- The contractors (the manufacturer's field representatives) shall have 30 days from the date they receive the contract to have the system installed and operating (weather permitting).

How long does it take to install the new system?
A typical system takes between two and four days. Home occupants will be able to use their waste water system during the entire time, except for about 3-4 hours when the actual pipe connections occur.

I have big trees – is this a problem?
During the site visit / evaluation process, trees and other obstacles will be noted. If a tree is in the way of a new system, it may need to be removed and the removal cost is the responsibility of the property owner. If the applicant's property is in the Critical Area, a tree removal permit may be required.

Our septic tank is on a very steep slope, is this a problem?
Installing a system is a challenge but it's not really a problem. A 'poly' tank, one not made from concrete, may be required because large equipment may not be able to access steep slopes. Also, if the property is in the Critical Area, the use of sediment and erosion control measures may be required as part of the contract.

I believe my deck / sidewalk / patio is over my septic tank!
If your current septic system is covered by a deck or other structure, the structure must be removed, at the owner's expense. Replacement of a deck, patio, walkway, etc is the responsibility of the property owner.

I think I have a Zoning violation – is this a problem?
Properties with zoning violations can not receive grant funding or permits. During the site visit / evaluating staff will observe the property for possible zoning violations and discuss what action, if any, must be taken with the property owners. Typical zoning violations include the construction of decks or sheds, piers, retaining walls, additions to a home or garage, without permits.

I've been waiting for months – when will I get my septic system?
The program is very popular and with limited funds not everyone will receive the grant.

If your property is not initially selected, your application will remain in the process for future consideration. Because the top priority for funding are failed septic systems, it's important to keep us advised of any changes to your system. Unless your septic system has failed or you have a metal tank, it may take a very long time until your property is awarded the grant.

I think my system is failing; now. What can I do?
If you believe your septic tank or drain field is failing or has failed, contact the Calvert Environmental Health Division immediately: 410.535.3922.

I've been told I need a new drain field – can the grant pay for that?
The grant provides financial assistance to upgrade the portion of the system that reduces nitrogen – the septic tank. Repair or replacement of a septic drain field, trenches or seepage pit is the responsibility of the property owner. There are programs to assist property owners with low and limited income. Contact the Health Department for assistance.

What maintenance is required for nitrogen-reducing systems?
Since advanced pretreatment units have electrical and mechanical components, periodic maintenance and inspections by a qualified contractor are essential. The frequency of inspection and maintenance will vary based on the type of unit. Owners should follow the manufacturer's maintenance requirements recommended by the installer. A maintenance agreement or service contract with a qualified contractor is highly recommended. The overall effectiveness of a nitrogen-reducing system and its level of wastewater treatment depend upon the use of the system. Bleach, detergents and household chemicals should be used sparingly. <u>According to County Code, garbage disposal units are prohibited on properties served by on-site septic systems</u>. All leftover food and grease should be discarded as solid waste in garbage cans or composted, if appropriate.

Where can I get additional information?

For **GRANT** information, contact the grant manager of the Calvert County Bay Restoration Fund:

Steve Kullen, Bay Restoration Fund Grant Manager
Calvert County Department of Planning & Zoning
150 Main Street
Prince Frederick MD 20678
410-535-1600 x2336

For **TECHNICAL** septic information, contact Matt Cumers, Registered Sanitarian, with the Calvert Environmental Health Division: 410-535-3922

NOTICE: Effective Oct 21, 2009 the Maryland Department of the Environment imposed a restriction on the use of the grant to only those properties with failed or failing septic systems in the Critical Area.