


Ravalli County begins multi-year evaluation of septic impacts

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HAMILTON - Ravalli County officials are beginning a multi-year evaluation of the impact of septic systems in the Florence area.

Using well test data and information from the state, the county would like to eventually conduct similar evaluations in other areas of the valley.

Efforts are being focused on Florence first because of previous groundwater concerns and because that's the area of the valley likely to see the heaviest pressure to develop, said Lea Guthrie, the county's director of environmental health.

The county has received a \$100,000 state grant to do the work.

"One main question that comes up is what are all these individual septic systems doing to the groundwater?" Guthrie said.

Using information from volunteer test wells, the county, with the help of a consultant, will create a model using site-specific data to determine how future septic systems would affect groundwater. Eventually, Guthrie said, the model can be used as a planning tool for the county.

"This is a fluid tool, where we could play with the numbers," she said. "If someone is proposing, for example, 20 lots, we could run the numbers and find that discharge or potential impacts are unacceptable, or work on mitigation strategies like changing the shape, location, density or septic system type to mitigate the possible effects of the subdivision."

The county information is being dovetailed into a state Bureau of Mines and Geology study looking at shallow and deep groundwater flows, said Ginette Abdo, a hydrogeologist with the agency in Butte.

The state has funding to conduct groundwater investigation programs in seven areas of western Montana focusing on regions subject to high growth.

The county study will not be completed until late 2011 or early 2012, Guthrie said.

The county is still looking for landowners who would like to have their wells included in the study. For more information call Anthony York at 375-6565.

Reach reporter Jeff Schmerker at 363-3300 or at jeff.schmerker@ravallirepublic.com.

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