

Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee

SB 2267

January 30, 2025

Chairperson Luick and members of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Committee:

I am Erin Ourada, the administrator of Western Plains Public Health, a five-county public health unit based in Mandan. We oversee the installation of onsite septic systems in Grant, Mercer, Morton, Oliver, and Sioux Counties, as well as extended responsibilities in Emmons and Kidder Counties. Approximately 7% of North Dakota's population lives in these seven counties.

I support a statewide structure for the oversight of onsite septic system installations that ensures environmental protection and local authority. Such a structure must protect our rivers, lakes, streams, drinking water, children, and pets. Unfortunately, SB 2267 does not achieve these goals, which is why I oppose it.

Our health unit has taken pride in protecting the environment and our communities through onsite septic system oversight since the 1970s. In 2024 alone, we licensed 46 installers, permitted and inspected 112 systems, and investigated five complaints. This work, totaling 950 hours across seven counties, is equivalent to a 0.5 FTE position.

We maintain records dating back to the 1970s, which are frequently shared with homeowners, realtors, and potential property buyers. Recent records are digitally mapped with GPS technology to provide accurate system data to interested parties. Homeowners and installers contact us for troubleshooting, guidance, and collaboration with county planning and zoning departments. For example, in Morton County, a septic permit from our office is required before a building permit is issued.

Despite the critical nature of this work, funding is limited. Fees from licenses and permits cover only 58% of expenses, with the remainder funded by county

mill levies and limited state funding. Costs include salaries, extensive travel, GPS systems, cell phones, and training.

Removing local public health authority under SB 2267 would disrupt a system that has served our communities well for decades. Such a drastic change risks delays in service, reduced local expertise, and diminished environmental protections.

We recognize the need for improvements, such as a statewide code and licensing structure. However, these changes should build on the existing network of dedicated environmental health practitioners rather than replace it.

For these reasons, I urge you to oppose SB 2267 and instead support solutions that preserve local input, protect public health, and safeguard our environment.

Respectfully submitted,
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