Exploring Alternatives
A New England onsite training program gathers designers, installers and regulators for a crash course on alternative residential systems
By Jim Kneiszel

New England onsite professionals are getting a glimpse into new national training programs designed to acquaint installers, designers and the regulators they work with, with residential alternative technology systems.

Working through Environmental Protection Agency initiatives, the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission developed a one-day training program, “Alternative Onsite Wastewater Technologies.” The conference was given as a pilot project to designers, installers and municipal water officials in Lakeville, Mass., last October and Waterbury, Vt., in November. With some adjustments, it will be brought to several New England communities this spring.

Mixed reviews
Vermonters gave mixed reviews to the overview of alternative systems. Some designers believed the information was too basic, according to Allison Lowry, principal soil scientist for the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. But Tom Groves, who developed the program for the New England commission, said many onsite professionals, especially installers, might find the introduction to alternative systems a helpful first step toward seeking new strategies for building residential systems.

Among the topics were distribution media gravel and gravelless technologies, collection and transmission components, pretreatment components, grease interceptors, aerobic treatment units, lagoons and constructed wetlands, according to Groves, one of the presenters and director of wastewater and onsite training for the commission, described numerous residential technologies and touched on system selection strategies.

It was much more basic for people who aren’t as aware of or familiar with these technologies,” Groves said. “We showed them how different technologies work and what some of the benefits are.

“If the installer understands why the designer wants to do something a certain way that will make for a better product. They’ll be able to build better systems. - Mary Clark

Education requirements
The challenge is to ramp up the technology learning curve and provide effective solutions to more residential onsite situations, Groves said. With installers, designers and regulators sitting side-by-side to learn new basic techniques, it should be easier to meet that challenge, he said.

“We’re working toward a better education and understanding of technologies and how they can work and do the job,” Groves said. “I think we’ve learned some lessons on our own, and we’re very happy with results of the first two (presentations). I feel like we hit the mark.”

After more presentations and more changes to the program, the workshop will be published on the Web for other states and trainers to use, Groves said. Additional training sessions will be valuable, as the Vermont legislature in January may consider changes in continuing education requirements for system designers, Lowry said. For background on the training sessions in Vermont, go to the Web at www.anr.state.vt.us.