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Building and Plumbing Newsflash 635

On-site sewage facilities – Setback distances

Purpose

To provide information about the application of the [Queensland Plumbing and Wastewater Code](#) (QPWC) when designing and installing on-site sewage facilities.

Who should use it?

Local governments, industry practitioners and homeowners can use this guidance to interpret and apply appropriate setback distances under the QPWC for various types of on-site sewage facilities. This includes where the on-site sewage treatment plant is required to have an approval from the Chief Executive, Department of Housing and Public Works in accordance with the [Plumbing and Drainage Act 2018 \(the Act\)](#).

Background

An on-site sewage facility includes the on-site sewage treatment plant and its associated land application area where treated wastewater (effluent) is dispersed on the property. A facility will typically include:

- On-site sewage treatment plant—which uses mechanical, biological and/or filtration methods to treat effluent to a secondary or advanced secondary level of water quality, or
- Septic tank—which uses biological methods to treat effluent to a primary level of water quality, and
- Land application area—the approved part of the property where effluent from the plant is dispersed. Depending on the treatment level of effluent, this area may be either above or below ground.

To protect public health and the environment, the QPWC specifies minimum setback distances from certain structures and sensitive areas. For example, effluent treated to advanced secondary quality must be setback at least 10 metres from a watercourse. For on-site sewage facilities, these distances vary depending on the level of treatment and the effluent's water quality. Facilities producing higher-quality effluent can have shorter setback distances, allowing installation on smaller blocks or closer to sensitive areas.

Setback distances under the QPWC

A facility which includes an on-site sewage plant of the type issued with a treatment plant approval under the Act, must be designed and installed in accordance with the designated water quality stated in the approval.

Minimum setback distances for on-site sewage facilities producing different levels of effluent quality are specified in Appendix 1, Table T5 of the QPWC. For example, the minimum setback distances from watercourses, bores, dams, etc are:

Effluent quality	Minimum setback distances from a watercourse, bore, dam etc.
Advanced secondary	10 m
Secondary	30 m
Primary	50 m

Figure 1 provides a practical example of how setback distances apply for an advanced secondary facility with subsurface irrigation i.e. below ground.

The setback distances apply to the quality of effluent produced as part of the whole on-site sewage facility, which includes the on-site sewage treatment plant and its associated land application area.

The setback distance requirements apply to the whole of the on-site sewage facility and not to individual components of the facility. If a facility has been granted a treatment plant approval (for its design, installation and operation) under the Act for advanced secondary quality effluent, the minimum setback distance of 10 metres specified in the QPWC for watercourses, dams, bores, etc applies.

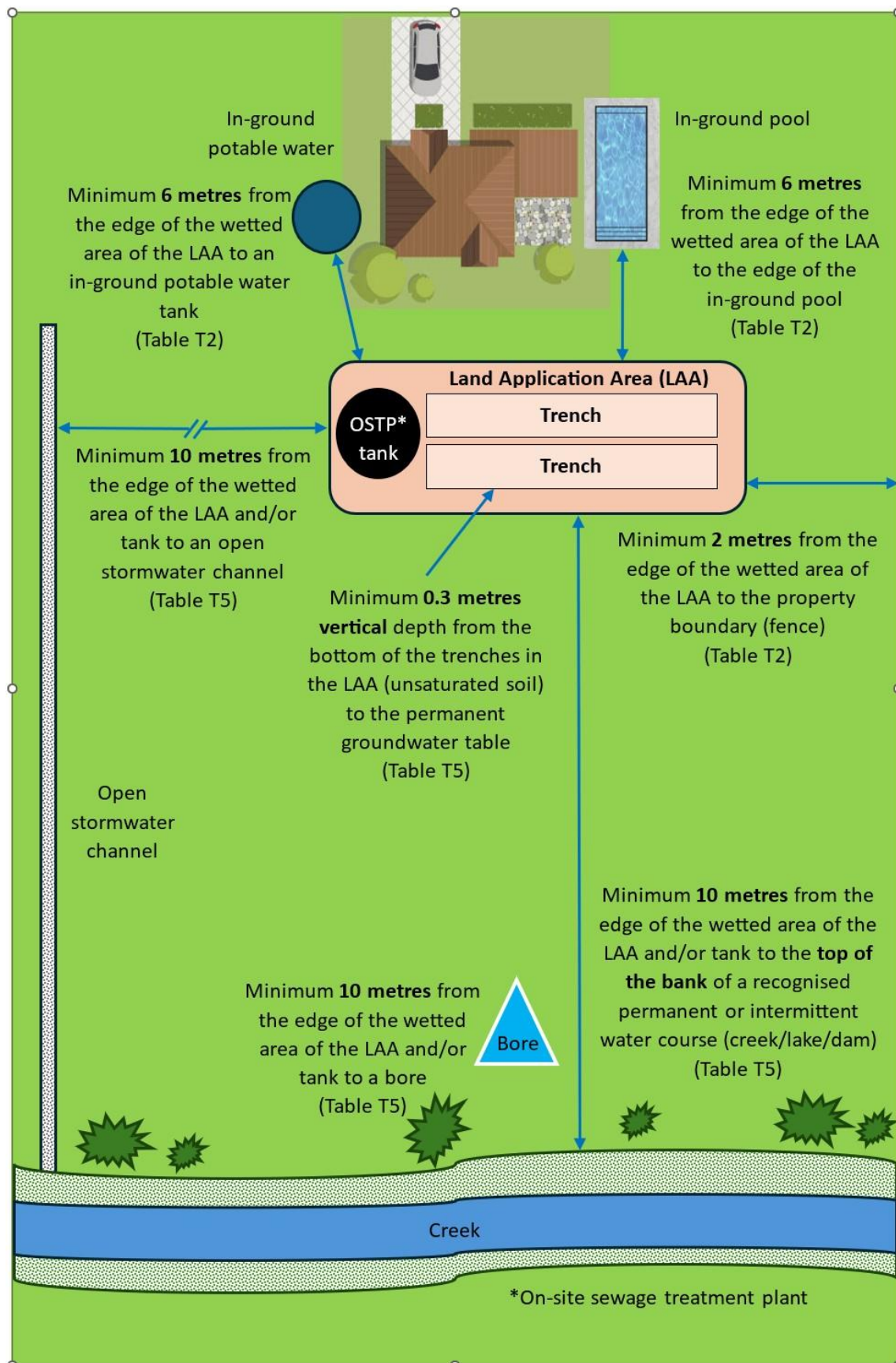
The Department is aware of the 3 September 2025 decision of the Queensland Development Tribunal ([Appeal No. 25-011](#)), which considered the setback distance for a specific on-site sewerage facility and reached a conclusion that a 50 metre setback was appropriate. In determining that a longer setback distance was required, the Tribunal relied on its finding about the quality of effluent from the septic tank that was included as part of the on-site sewage facility.

For clarity, the setback distances requirements contained in Appendix 1, Table T5 of the QPWC apply to the whole of the on-site sewage facility and not to individual components of the facility. For example, a system producing advanced secondary quality effluent must comply with a minimum setback distance of 10 metres from watercourses, dams, bores, etc.

Next steps

The Department is considering updates to the QPWC to address any potential uncertainty in interpretation of the setback requirements for local governments, industry and consumers.

Figure 1: Example – Minimum setback distances for an advanced secondary facility (with subsurface irrigation)



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