



**State Onsite Regulators  
Association**

**STRATEGIC PLAN**

**2023 --- 2028**

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## Executive Summary

This strategic plan is the State Onsite Regulator Association's (SORA) official strategy and action plan for use by its leaders to ensure that SORA remains effective, responsive, and continuously relevant to its stakeholders and their interests. The primary purposes of this plan are to:

- Supplement the SORA bylaws by explicitly defining SORA's strategic direction and aspirations; and
- Provide the overarching accountability framework by which SORA will prioritize and conduct its activities to achieve the long-term vision, mission, and goals in a manner consistent with its governing values defined herein.

The nature of the plan is strategic, rather than tactical, setting general direction rather than specifying tasks. The plan includes implementation and accountability tools for use by the Board of Directors, committee leaders, and stakeholders to document and continually track SORA's progress toward successfully implementing this strategic plan. These tools are intended to be continually updated. As SORA develops and evolves, so will this strategic plan.

A brief organizational description of SORA is included to illustrate the historical path and foundations of the organization. This, in concert with the assessment of SORA's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, formed the basis for SORA's mission, vision, values and strategic goals.

This diagram depicts the integrated relationship between SORA and its stakeholders. SORA is dynamic partnership that draws its strength from direct engagement with each partner, and the two-way communication and support that SORA provides and receives from its partners.



## Board Authorization of Strategic Plan

This update to the strategic plan was developed at the direction of the 2022 SORA Board. The Strategic Planning Committee presented this strategic plan to the Board of Directors on November 3, 2022. The SORA Board of Directors approved this Strategic Plan with changes set out at the April 4, 2023, meeting (see table below). This strategic plan continues until the plan is revised or rescinded by the Board.

<b>SORA Board of Directors 2022</b>		
<b>Representative Area</b>	<b>Representative Member</b>	<b>3 yr. Term Expiration</b>
Region 1	Amanda Clark (CT)	2024
Region 2	Stephen Marshall (NY)	2025
Region 3	Travis Sterner (MD)	2024
Region 4	Chris Edwards (KY)	2025
Region 5	Mike Mettler (IN)	2023
Region 6	Matt Pace (OK)	2024
Region 7	Eric Folks (MO)	2025
Region 8	Chuck Cousino (CO)	2024
Region 9	Vacant	20xx
Region 10	Jeremy Simmons (WA)	2023
Canada	Derek Smith (Manitoba)	2023
Tribal	Michael Bolt	2023
At Large	Marcia Degen	2025
<b>Officers</b>	<b>Board Member</b>	<b>Term Expiration</b>
President	Travis Sterner	2023
President Elect	Chuck Cousino	2023
Past President	Marcia Degen	2023
Treasurer	Michael Broussard	2023
Secretary	Matt Pace	2023

## Organizational Evolution

Organizationally, SORA traces its roots to the first Earth Day (1970) and the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1972 when the Clean Water Act focused on protecting public health by maintaining a safe and healthy environment. In 1972 when the Clean Water Act was signed into law, work began to protect and improve the water quality in the lakes, streams, and oceans. Among the many initiatives created by the Clean Water Act was the National Small Flows Clearinghouse (NSFC). In 1977, a provision in the Clean Water Act required EPA to fund a national clearinghouse devoted to providing technical assistance, information distribution and training to small municipal and decentralized wastewater systems. Its purpose was to improve small community capacity to address wastewater treatment issues. The clearinghouse resided at West Virginia University and was continuously funded as the NSFC by EPA to 2005.

By 1996, EPA recognized that considerable progress on centralized wastewater treatment systems had been made, but also acknowledged the high cost of municipal treatment plant construction. EPA turned its attention to decentralized wastewater treatment and management as a viable cost-effective technology alternative. In a 1996 general Report to Congress, the House Appropriations Committee highlighted the importance of decentralized wastewater treatment to the country and that it should be promoted where appropriate. This led to the 1997 Clean Water Action Plan and subsequently EPA's 1999 *State Voluntary Guidelines for Onsite and Decentralized Wastewater Treatment and Management*.

In 1999, the first National Onsite Wastewater State Regulators Conference was hosted by the NSFC and held in St. Louis. Mike Cook, then Director of the EPA Office of Wastewater Management, addressed regulators from 41 states. He stated that the St. Louis conference forum had brought together the best people qualified to work on the issues relevant to decentralized systems. He called for a stimulating exchange of information that might evolve into technologies that would support the decentralized industry. He concluded that it was EPA's vision that in the future, 25 percent of U.S. homes would be served by properly installed, well-maintained decentralized systems. These systems would be managed by a national plan that assured they would not contribute to water quality problems.

From this first meeting, many significant events emerged. The state regulators recognized the need to continue an annual national conference. Regulators now had a voice that was being recognized by EPA and other associations such as the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA), the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) and the National Sanitation Foundation International (NSF). The regulators saw value in the exchange of ideas and the opportunity to compare problem-solving strategies that the conference provided. They recognized the need for an administrative body to maintain a state regulators information

exchange network and to provide opportunity for the states to interact. They saw the value of incorporating the private sector into their forums, allowing them to interact professionally and informally with those providing decentralized services.

These administrative elements were addressed gradually by succeeding annual conferences. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference (2001) in Arlington, Virginia, the industry representatives were officially recognized as the Captains of Industry (COI's). These COI companies were comprised of manufacturers of various collection, treatment and dispersal technologies that support the decentralized industry nationwide. Arrangements had also been made to include regional EPA onsite coordinators at the annual conferences. By 2007, at the 9<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Reno, the name SORA and Captains of Industry were in common usage.

The two now-recognized groups had collaborated even before the first conference and had produced white papers, which were used by EPA in the 1999 voluntary management guidelines. In 2008, a steering committee was created to develop SORA's official bylaws, which were ratified by the membership at the 2009 Atlanta annual conference. Current bylaws are available on the SORA website at [www.soraus.com](http://www.soraus.com). As of 2022, SORA has hosted 25 annual conferences held in many different states. Five of these were partnered with NEHA and eight with NOWRA.

NSFC continued to receive EPA funding for their administrative support of SORA until 2015 when the funding ceased. At that time, SORA needed to decide whether it could survive on its own or cease to exist. It was decided to create a non-profit association that was funded by regulator membership fees and industry representative fees. A new fee policy was developed, and the first membership fee collection period began January 2018.

SORA has a Board of Directors (Board) that participates in monthly teleconferences and maintains three standing committees: Strategic Planning, Membership, and Conference/Business Meeting Planning. SORA also maintains a private listserv for regulators and COIs with over 220 contributors and participates as an original founding member of EPA's 2005 Partnership for Decentralized Wastewater Technology Memorandum of Understanding (MOU Partners). The MOU Partners now comprised of 20 membership organizations.

SORA's members include government regulators of decentralized and onsite wastewater systems from 43 states, U.S. Territories, Native American Tribes, and Canadian Provinces. Affiliate membership is open to organizations and federal agencies having a vested interest in SORA's mission. Through the Captains of Industry (COI), membership is also available to private companies who offer products and services for decentralized and onsite wastewater treatment.

SORA serves as dialogue facilitator between regulators and among regulators, training and testing facilities, and with product developers, manufacturers, distributors and service providers. The goal

is to convert quality research, existing information, and technology into state and local regulatory programs using solutions that protect public health and the environment. By basing regulations in science and shared experiences, the decentralized wastewater industry will be considered a viable and sustainable option for long-term wastewater infrastructure solutions.

## Major products and services

- **Conference/Business Meeting** – Each year SORA conducts its State Onsite Regulators Association conference and business meeting, bringing together environmental health professionals focused on onsite wastewater with industry professionals (manufacturers) to share ideas, share information on new technologies, and to benefit from educational sessions on topics of interest. SORA conducts its annual business meeting where new officers are elected, bylaws are updated, and committees report on progress during the past year and direction for the coming year. Previous SORA events have been stand-alone events as well as partnered events with other organizations like NEHA, NOWRA, the National Association of Wastewater Technicians (NAWT), as well as regional and state associations/organizations.
- **Listserves** – In the early stages of SORA’s formation, state regulators saw a need for onsite regulators in all the states to access a method of communication among themselves. This need was met with the creation of the first SORA listserv. The success of that first listserv has transitioned into two additional listservs maintained by SORA for the benefit of the organization. These listservs and their intent/benefit are as follows:
  - ***SORA*** – (Created in 2005, revised in 2016) Listserv members are onsite regulators from member states, tribes, and Canadian provinces. This listserv is a restricted access listserv developed to allow open communication between regulators. Regulators frequently use this listserv to determine how various regulatory issues are handled in the other states, aiding them to rectify issues they are facing and/or update their statutes or regulations. The listserv provides a platform for a more consistent application of regulations across the country.
  - ***SORA Board (formally Steering)*** – (Created in 2008, revised in 2016) Listserv members are members of the SORA Board. This listserv allows facilitation of the monthly SORA Board meetings as well as communication among Board members between scheduled calls when issues arise that need immediate attention.
  - ***Captains of Industry (COI)*** – (Created in 2011, updated in 2017) Listserv members are members of the Captains of Industry. These are onsite wastewater

manufacturers who see the value of working with state regulators to advance the field of onsite and decentralized wastewater treatment and dispersal. This listserv enables manufacturers to easily communicate among themselves regarding current issues and topics.

- **Joint SORA/COI** - (Created in 2019) All SORA and COI members can access this listserv. It provides a platform for open, two-way, communication between all SORA and COI members.
- **Website** – The SORA website was originally managed by NSFC. In 2017 SORA developed a new website which contains many new features. Visitors of the new website ([www.soraus.com](http://www.soraus.com)) will find information about SORA the organization, including membership information and forms, the EPA MOU partnership, event information, and COI members.

## **Major Accomplishments**

- **Publications / White Papers:**
  - *Decentralized Onsite Wastewater Technologies – Sustainable Green Infrastructure Protects Source Water Quality and Public Health*
  - *Decentralized/Onsite Wastewater Projects and Programs – Opportunities for Funding*
  - *Onsite Wastewater Nutrient Regulation Survey Report*
- **25 consecutive SORA Conferences/Business Meetings**
- **Charter member of the US EPA Decentralized MOU**
- **Key collaborator on the US EPA State Voluntary Guidelines for Onsite and Decentralized Wastewater Treatment and Management**
- **Major expansion of membership, with over 250 list-servs members**
- **Maintaining the organization and its functions after NESC terminated all funding and administrative services.**

## Vision Statement

SORA is a collaborative association, bringing regulators, industry, and federal MOU partners together to share information and assist in the advancement of the onsite wastewater industry.

## Mission Statement

SORA's purpose is to protect public health and the environment by leading the onsite wastewater regulatory industry. SORA will accomplish this by:

- Facilitation of an ongoing national dialogue between and among regulators working in the decentralized onsite wastewater industry.
- Working with state and local regulators to communicate use of proven technologies, allowing individual states to make informed decisions on implementation within their current regulations.
- Promote the integration of science-based research and information into regulatory programs, i.e., regulation development, policies and/or practices.

## Values Statements

**Leadership** Active promotion of the onsite industry and engagement with all stakeholders

**Collaboration** Work collaboratively to implement best practices and build connections between regulators and other stakeholders in the onsite industry

**Communication** Strong internal and external communication with all stakeholders

**Sustainability** Environmental and public health protection and economic sustainability for current and future generations

**Economic Viability** Financial stability and utilization of effective and efficient business practices

**Knowledge** Supporting sound science and research and encourage incorporation of this knowledge into decision making and regulatory frameworks.

**Customer Service** Provide excellent customer service to SORA members and stakeholders.

**Professionalism** Presentation of credentials, training and abilities with integrity and pride

# Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities Threats (SWOT) Analysis of SORA

## **Strengths:**

- Broad representation across the country
- Diverse experience across states regarding different technologies, as well as public health/ environmental challenges
- Partnerships with international, national, and state organizations
- Annual Conference/Business Meeting occurs with partner support
- Listservs enhance communication between both regulators and the industry
- Established inter-relationships amongst and between onsite regulators and COI
- Productive workgroups
- An active dialogue with ability to come to consensus
- Strong volunteer support
- Executive director
- Active role as an EPA MOU partner

## **Weaknesses:**

- Small pool of active volunteers
- Lack of representation from member states
- Lack of regulator and COI membership participation
- Lack of advocacy from membership to promote SORA
- Limited web access/ social media presence

## **Opportunities:**

- Actively promote communications with decision and policy makers
- Encourage and identify new funding opportunities
- Promote effective onsite wastewater management approaches which can include Responsible Management Entities (RME) or other applicable management mechanisms
- Foster partnerships within the water resource, watershed, and onsite wastewater communities
- Develop a greater voice in the national planning process
- Provide technical assistance to the onsite wastewater organizations
- Maintain and increase participation using the listserv as a resource to gather and share information
- Create/ expand online profile utilizing available social media
- Expand data sharing for water resource, watershed, and onsite wastewater communities
- Expand virtual meeting experiences with video calls that could be better used to engage with states and industry
- Communicating use and implementation of federal funding dedicated to improving decentralized wastewater infrastructure

## **Threats:**

- Lack of funding access within onsite wastewater industry
  - Lack of sustainability due to low membership involvement
  - Lack of an understanding of the role of decentralized/onsite wastewater within the national wastewater infrastructure industry
  - Lack of understanding of onsite wastewater by external decision and policy makers
  - Lack of scope of decentralized management at the national scale
  - Lack of appropriate funding and regulatory staffing at the federal, State, and the local level
- Outdated regulations and complicated regulatory-change processes make it difficult to keep up with new technologies.

## **Trends**

We identified the following trends and how they might affect our organization:

### ***Political trends:***

- Limited government involvement and resources which identify onsite wastewater as a long term viable and sustainable treatment option
- Limited awareness of the importance of decentralized options in the U.S. legislature
- Presidential focus on green infrastructure and infrastructure funding may be beneficial for decentralized options
- Federal focus on centralized systems may be changing with the expansions in the CWSRF allowing decentralized project qualifications
- Additional funding options for disadvantaged communities
- New focus on the development of regulations in areas where there are possible impacts from sea level/ climate change

### ***Economic trends:***

- Limited federal support for decentralized wastewater treatment, considering it provides 25% of national infrastructure
- State budget limits for permitting programs
- Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) are difficult to access for smaller projects and lack state and local advocacy
- Funding focus on stormwater and surface water in many states
- Increased development utilizing onsite systems
- Various factors are increasing prices of onsite systems

### ***Societal trends:***

- Onsite wastewater is often forgotten until a problem occurs
- People served by onsite maintain an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality
- An increase in urban sprawl increases a need to regulate more onsite/decentralized wastewater systems
- Public apathy
- Mentality that “big pipe” is the only solution
- Lack of infrastructure for communities that are changing from seasonal to year-round
- Lack of education of the general public
- Greater appreciation for treated effluent beyond wastewater dispersal for onsite systems
- Green development is on the rise
- Property values are dependent on onsite infrastructure
- Ageing workforce, employee retention and hiring challenges
- Resistance to regulatory updates
- Remote working, causing an overall increase in domestic wastewater flows
- Recognition of environmental justice issues in decentralized systems

### ***Management trends:***

- Development of comprehensive watershed management plans that includes onsite
- Utilizing onsite strategies for nutrient reduction
- Exploring use of RMEs to establish successful and sustainable management models
- Exploring ways to track and locate onsite systems via GIS or national database
- New focus on funding options for on-site repairs in underserved communities

### ***Technological trends:***

- Lack of funding for research
- Regionalization of technological standards (Data Sharing)
- Technology use is increasing nationwide
- Water reuse technologies increasing due to public demand and drought
- Industry is reacting to regulatory changes (which are driven by social trends)
- Remote monitoring advancements for monitoring on-site systems and treatment devices

### ***Environmental Trends:***

- Water reuse
- Climate change (weather events, ground water levels, sea level)
- Limited natural resources for on-site construction
- Quality of buildable areas suitable for on-site septic system construction
- Additional treatment to prevent emerging contaminants

## Goals, Strategies and Objectives

The following tables outline four major goals of SORA, along with specific strategies, objectives and timeframes. These tables will drive activities within SORA for the next five years and will be utilized and updated continuously.

<b>Goal #1</b>	<b>Ensure SORA remains an important resource for onsite regulation development and dissemination of information within the onsite industry</b>
<b>#</b>	<b>Strategies and Objectives (specific-What, who, when)</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>SORA Board of Directors conduct monthly meetings</b>
<b>1</b>	Monthly President, Treasurer, and Secretary executive committee reports
<b>2</b>	Monthly Membership, Conference Planning, and Strategic Planning standing committee reports
<b>3</b>	Executive Director's report and updates
<b>B</b>	<b>SORA monitors the needs of members and adjusts to better serve all members.</b>
<b>1</b>	Identify policy decisions, trends and information that impact the onsite industry and relay that information to members
<b>2</b>	Identify new partnership opportunities
<b>3</b>	Create and disseminate policy recommendations

<b>Goal #2</b>	<b>Further Development of our robust communications and support network</b>
<b>#</b>	<b>Strategies and Objectives (specific-What, who, when)</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>SORA Board of Directors to maintain and enhance the communication of information between members</b>
<b>1</b>	Listserv maintenance and enhancement
<b>2</b>	Website maintenance and expansion
<b>2a</b>	Evaluation of member needs to enhance information available
<b>3</b>	Semi-annual Newsletter
<b>3a</b>	Source for important topics pertaining to the on-site profession
<b>4</b>	Improve communications with COI (ie. website, newsletter)
<b>4a</b>	Maintain a board member to be an outreach person to COI
<b>B</b>	<b>Actively engage current members in SORA; committee involvement</b>
<b>1</b>	Regional board members reach out to state members at least semi-annually for input
<b>2</b>	Increase SORA member participation in developing meaningful partnerships with stakeholder organizations

<b>Goal #3</b>	<b>Create and implement a proactive and responsive sustainability plan</b>
<b>#</b>	<b>Strategies and Objectives (specific-What, who, when)</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Update policy manual</b>
<b>1</b>	Ongoing to keep policy manual current
<b>2</b>	Add a policy on recognizing outstanding members
<b>3</b>	Update dues policy and treasurer's policy as appropriate
<b>B</b>	<b>Overall SORA operations plan</b>
<b>1</b>	Identify revenue and expenditures
<b>2</b>	Identify annual goals for SORA
<b>C</b>	<b>Annual evaluation of revenue sources (i.e. membership fees, COI, educational seminars etc.)</b>
<b>1</b>	Define COI benefits and annual dues
<b>2</b>	COI sponsorship of events- meet and greet
<b>D</b>	<b>Develop and maintain an inventory of members</b>
<b>1</b>	Maintain up to date spreadsheet
<b>2</b>	Identify regional members who are leaders

<b>Goal #4</b>	<b>Strengthen our relationships with national and state organizations</b>
<b>#</b>	<b>Strategies and Objectives</b> (specific; what, who, when)
<b>A</b>	<b>Providing onsite expertise to EPA MOU partners and other stakeholders</b>
<b>1</b>	SORA will continue to be a part of EPA MOU
<b>2</b>	SORA participate in EPA MOU partners call and comply with requirements of the MOU agreement.
<b>B</b>	<b>Recognize SORA leadership in onsite industry</b>
<b>1</b>	Award at NOWRA/SORA as applicable
<b>C</b>	<b>Identify all current partnerships and potential partnerships</b>
<b>1</b>	EPA, EPA-MOU Partners, NEHA, NAWT and NOWRA
<b>2</b>	Identify one member to communicate with each partner
<b>D</b>	<b>Continue Annual Conference Partnership</b>
<b>1</b>	Conference planning committee; Executive Director
<b>2</b>	Offer reduced rate conference to each member state

## **Communicating the Plan**

This plan will be widely communicated including through use of the following approaches:

1. Upon approval by the SORA Board of Directors, a PDF of the complete plan will be distributed on the SORA Board listserv, Regulators listserv, and COI listserv.
2. A PDF of the approved plan will be posted on the SORA website.
3. The Mission, Vision, and Values statements will be excerpted and placed prominently on the SORA web page.
4. SORA will provide a page link to SORA Partner organizations to link to the SORA Mission, Vision, and Values.
5. The Mission, Vision, and Values statements will be used in promotional publications.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation of the Plan**

Implementation of this plan is a function of the commitment of the members through various committees to meet the objective contained in this Strategic Plan. The strategic plan is a road map to our activities and the goals, strategies and objectives with target dates will inform the organization's focus.

### **Key Questions While Monitoring Implementation of the Plan**

1. What will the process of communication be between Board and committees indicating work process, flow, accomplishments, modification, and future direction?
2. Are the activities conducted under this strategic plan consistent with the strategic vision, mission, and values articulated in the plan?
3. Are we achieving our strategic objectives?

### **Status of Implementation**

Committees will report on progress to the Board. The board will review the annual progress for implementation of the plan.

### **Procedure for Changing the Plan**

The Strategic Planning Committee will update this plan with recommendation and approval from the Board.