



## MAINTAIN YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

Regular pumping is the single most important maintenance requirement of a septic system.

### The Problem

Poorly located or neglected septic systems can pose a serious threat of nutrient and bacterial pollution to local waterways. A neglected system can also cost homeowners a lot of money. If a septic system is not regularly pumped and maintained, it can result in a total failure of the system. Septic system failure is an expensive proposition as it means

that the entire system must be replaced at a cost of thousands of dollars! Play it safe for water quality and your pocketbook by taking care of your septic system.

Nitrogen loading from failing septic systems can adversely affect Maine's coastal ecosystems. When too much nitrogen gets into the water, it disturbs the natural balance by allowing too much algae (microscopic plants) to grow. The algae cloud the water and block vital sunlight to underwater plants. When the algae die and decay, they use up much of the oxygen needed by fish and shellfish, often killing them. Special "denitrifying" septic systems designed to reduce nitrogen loading to nearby coastal waters are available.

### The Solution

When properly used and maintained, septic systems are a safe and efficient way of dealing with household wastewater.

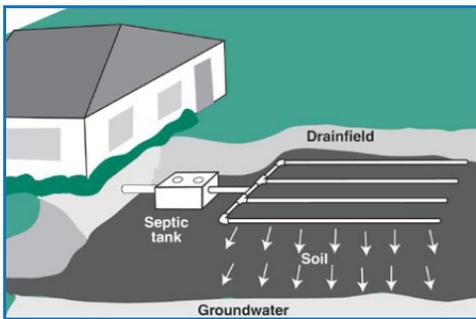
Many homeowners are under the misconception that a septic system, once installed, will work forever without maintenance. This is not true! Most septic systems, even with maintenance, will work effectively for only an average of 15 to 25 years.

**Did you know?**  
Foam on the water is not always a sign of a failed septic system. Natural foam has an earthy or fishy aroma. Detergent foam has a perfume scent.

To help protect against premature failure, the homeowner can follow a few simple procedures. These procedures help reduce sludge build-up, reduce water use, eliminate toxic waste, keep the system's bacteria working and protect the leaching system.

### DO Checklist

- Inspect your tank for signs of sludge buildup and make sure the baffles are in working order.
- Pump your tank as needed (every 2-3 years). Regular septic tank pumping and inspection will prolong the life of your septic system. A septic system costs less than \$300 to pump but \$12,000 or more to replace and can affect the resale of your property.
- Mark your septic system so you can protect it from vehicles and encroaching trees and shrubs.
- Conserve water; install water-saving devices, such as front-loading washers and low-flow faucets and shower heads to reduce volume of wastewater.



- Use biodegradable soaps and minimize toxic household products - such as drain cleaner and anti-bacterial soaps - which can kill the beneficial organisms that keep the system running well.
- Contact a site evaluator if your septic system shows signs of failure; contact your local plumbing inspector if you see evidence of other malfunctioning septic systems.
- Plant shrubs, trees and grasses downhill from your system to act as a sponge. Keep small trees and shrubs at least 10' away from your leach field and large trees at least 20' away. The root systems could interfere with the

infrastructure which can lead to premature system failures. Plant only grass over and near your septic system.

- Spread out your laundry loads to even out your water use and to avoid flushing your system.

- Point downspouts away from the drainfield.
- Dispose of non-degradable items such as fat, grease and oil, hair, tampons and disposable diapers in the trash. These materials will not break down and can cause clogging and premature failure of your system.

#### **DON'T Checklist**

- Don't use a garbage disposal—it adds 50% more solids to your system.
- Don't pour automotive oil, cooking oil or grease down the drain.
- Don't drive or park vehicles over the septic system or leach field. Doing so can compact the soil in your drainfield or damage the pipes, tank or other septic system components.
- Don't plant bushes or trees over the leach field.
- Don't use too much water, especially during rainy seasons when the ground is saturated.
- Don't pour paint or paint thinner down the drain.
- Don't use drain cleaners and other toxic chemical products.
- Don't use chemical or biological septic system cleaners, which can plug up the leach fields and ruin your system. Supplements and additives do not improve operation of your system. Some may actually harm your system by causing solids to be carried into the drainfield, which causes premature clogging. In addition, supplements containing organic solvents can cause groundwater contamination.
- Don't flush feminine hygiene products, cat litter, disposable diapers or other non-biodegradable products into your system.
- Don't flush medicines, particularly antibiotics.
- Don't use products labeled "antibacterial."

#### **Did you know?**

*For clogged drains:*

- Use a plunger or mechanical snake.
- Or pour one handful of baking soda and 1/2 cup of white vinegar down the drainpipe, and cover tightly for one minute. Repeat process as needed.
- Or pour 1/2 cup salt and 1/2 cup baking soda down the drain, followed by six cups of boiling water. Let sit for several hours or overnight, then flush with water.

#### **What to Do if Your System Fails**

Call the Maine Department of Health Engineering, at 289-5672. They may refer you to your local plumbing inspector or a licensed site evaluator.

#### **Help is on the way.**

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection's Small Community Grant Program provides grants to help replace malfunctioning septic systems. Grants can be used to fund from 25% to 100% of the design and construction costs. Individual families may qualify for the grant program if their federal taxable income for the previous year was \$40,000 or less. Commercial establishments may qualify if their gross profit for the previous year was \$100,000 or less. A sliding-scale grant percentage applies depending on the amount of income or profit. Contact Kittery (439-1633) or Eliot town offices (439-1817) for more info.



#### **Spruce Creek Watershed Improvement Project**

Town of Kittery, Maine  
200 Rogers Road Extension  
Kittery, Maine 03904  
[www.protectkitterywaters.org](http://www.protectkitterywaters.org)