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SEPTIC SYSTEM MAINTENANCE

Nearly all rural homes and businesses in Wisconsin are served by private sewage (septic) systems for domestic sewage disposal. In general, these systems require little maintenance in order to provide years of trouble-free service. However, some routine maintenance cannot be avoided.

Most septic systems consist of a septic tank and soil absorption field. The septic tank is a large watertight tank that allows for differential settling of solids and for bacterial decomposition. The soil absorption field, under ideal conditions, both treats and disposes of septic tank effluent in a manner that protects the environment and public health.

The most common misconception about septic tank maintenance is that it is not necessary until a problem occurs. However, research has shown that bacteria liquefy only about 40 percent of the solids entering a septic tank. This means that with normal use the capacity of the septic tank to store solids is constantly reduced, and thus there is a need for periodic cleaning. For most residential uses, a properly sized septic tank should be serviced every two to three years. A licensed septic tank pumper must do the servicing, and is responsible for proper disposal of the waste. No one should ever enter a septic or other treatment tank because toxic gases may be present.

Septic tank servicing is recommended from spring to late summer to promote recovery of natural bacteria populations in the septic tank. Biological starters or additives are available in Wisconsin to promote that recovery. They must be state approved for use in a septic system. State review of biological or chemical additives is not to review effectiveness, but to confirm that the product does not contain toxic or hazardous substances and does not disturb the functioning of the system. Be aware that the use of additives is NOT a substitute for periodic septic tank maintenance.

In addition to proper septic tank maintenance, the quantity and quality of the wastewater discharged to the soil absorption system is a major factor in system performance. Leaky toilets and faucets, as well as poor water use habits, have all been blamed for early failure of absorption fields. There are also other causes for failure, such as poor soil conditions, or improper system design, construction, or maintenance.

People can use water conserving plumbing fixtures such as 1 to 1.6 gallon flush toilets, 1.5 gallon per minute shower heads, and sudsavers on clothes washers to help reduce waste water discharges. Garbage disposals are not recommended for use with septic systems because the fine particles created may bypass the septic tank's baffles and clog soil pores. Normal amounts of household cleaners and disinfectants should not harm a properly functioning system when used according to manufacturer's recommendations. However, disposal of solvents and toxic or hazardous chemicals into a septic system may not only harm the system, but may cause serious groundwater pollution.

After servicing the septic or treatment tank, make sure that manhole covers are properly resealed and locked to prevent accidental entry.

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Pursuant to Chapter 13, Section 13.51, and Wis Stats., Section 144.245(3), your septic tank shall be visually inspected by a plumber, POWTS inspector or a person licensed under sec. 281.48 Wis. Stats., and pumped within three years of the date of installation and at least once every three years thereafter, unless upon inspection the tank is found to have less than 1/3 of the volume occupied by sludge and scum. This Department will mail a Sanitary Maintenance Certification Form to coincide with the year that certification of pumping and/or inspection is due.

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