

Take good care of your septic system

If you have a private septic system, it is important that you inspect and pump it regularly to prevent emergency back-ups and leaks that can contaminate drinking water supplies and the St. Croix River.

A typical septic system has four main components: a pipe from the home, a septic tank, a drainfield, and the soil. Within the septic tank, solids settle out, forming sludge, while oil and grease float to the top, creating a scum layer. The wastewater is then pumped out to a drainfield where microbes in the soil digest or remove most of the contaminants before the water eventually reaches groundwater. For a septic system to continue functioning, the scum and sludge need to be pumped out regularly. In Washington County, homeowners are required to pump their septic tanks at least every three years unless an inspection shows that pumping is not yet necessary.

Why should you inspect your septic system? To begin, regular inspections and pumping will save you money. It typically costs \$200-300 to pump a septic tank, unless the contractor needs to find the tank and then excavate to access the opening, which would cost \$350-400 more. Replacing a septic tank or drainfield, on the other hand, can cost several thousand dollars. Also, if your system backs up it can flood your yard and basement with wastewater. Some signs that your system might not be working include pooling water or muddy soil around your septic system or in your basement, toilet or sink backups when you flush or do laundry, or strips of bright green grass over the drainfield.

Additionally, a study by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency found that 3.7% of the phosphorus pollution in lakes and rivers in Minnesota comes from individual sewage treatment systems (ISTS), which is more than three times as much pollution as from animal feedlots in the state. Along with phosphorus, household wastewater can contain disease-causing bacteria and viruses, pharmaceutical drugs, household cleaners and anything else you might flush or wash down the drain.

By limiting your water use inside the house and watching what you dispose of in your sinks and toilets, you can reduce how often your septic tank needs to be pumped and help prevent your system from failing. Leaky toilets can waste as much as 200 gallons of water a day, and leaky sinks can be a problem too. Replacing old fixtures with high-efficiency toilets, showerheads and washing machines can also help to reduce your household water use. What shouldn't you flush down your toilet? Dental floss, feminine hygiene products, condoms, diapers, cotton swabs, cigarette butts, coffee grounds, cat litter and paper towels can clog and potentially damage septic system components if they become trapped. Household chemicals, gasoline, oil, pesticides, antifreeze, and paint can stress or destroy the biological treatment taking place in the system or might contaminate groundwater or local lakes.

Request a septic inspection by calling the Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment at 651-430-6655. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency also has a searchable database of ISTS contractors that can do inspections, repairs and installations - www.pca.state.mn.us/programs/ists. If you do need to replace your septic system, rural property owners with more than five acres can qualify for low interest loans through the Department of Agriculture. For more information contact the Washington Conservation District at 651-275-1136.