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The Wastewater Issue

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Five quick tips for managing your home wastewater treatment system

By Joseph Valdez, RCAC Rural Development Specialist

Home wastewater treatment systems are common in rural communities as well as those without a central wastewater collection and/or treatment facility. According to some estimates, one in four Americans have a private septic system. In a private septic system, waste flows by gravity or is pumped by an electric pump from the home into an underground septic

tank which discharges into a disposal area known as a leach field.

Proper management of a home septic system is critical to ensure safety and sanitation and to ensure that you don't have costly system failures. Follow these five rules to keep your septic system running smoothly.



Maintain and operate your system correctly

Never flush anything other than toilet paper down your toilet. Some common items people flush (and shouldn't) include baby wipes or personal cleansing cloths, paper towels, hygiene products, sand, coffee grounds, cigarette butts, and kitty litter. No septic system is able to break down these items.

Establish a regular pumping schedule

To keep your system functioning properly, it is important to establish a regular pumping schedule. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends that a family of four have the septic system professionally pumped every two to three years to empty the sludge and scum (fats, oils, and greases) that may build up and clog the inlet and outlets in a septic tank. The schedule may vary depending on the family size, the system size and the amount of wastewater that enters the septic system on a regular basis.

Reduce what goes down the drain

Remember the term NO F.O.G. (fats, oils, grease) to ensure that there is no damage to your septic system. Wipe out pots and pans with a paper towel and dispose of the towel in the trash before washing them to limit the amount of fat, oil or grease that goes down the drain. Never dump oil or grease in the drain or down the toilet, as they will solidify in the pipes and cause system back-ups and clogging. Avoid dumping chemicals down the drain as this can interfere with the bacterial process that breaks down the waste in a septic tank. Also, avoid using a garbage disposal that dumps food waste into the septic system, as undigested food increases the Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) in a septic tank.

Inspect regularly

Establish a regular inspection schedule to look for signs of a malfunctioning system, including water leaking at the top of the tank or effluent surfacing from either the septic tank or leach field onto the yard surface. This is especially hazardous to children and pets who may be running or playing in the yard.

Conserve water

Extend your septic system's useful life by reducing the amount of water that enters it. Fix leaks and broken valves in sinks and toilet tanks. Space out laundry loads throughout the week instead of doing it all in one day to limit the amount of water going through the system. Stick to four to five minute showers.

Learn more about how to properly manage your septic system and find more resources available for septic owners here:

<https://www.epa.gov/septic/septicsmart-homeowners>

http://www.nesc.wvu.edu/subpages/septic_defined.cfm

or any Local, county/state environmental quality/protection agencies in your state. 