

1.4 Onsite Waste Treatment Systems

Properly maintained onsite treatment can provide high-quality, dependable, and inexpensive service through natural processes (i.e. aerobic and anaerobic bacterial action) and return usable waste products to the local environment. However, untreated waste from an inadequate or failed treatment system can cause human health hazards from the spread of bacteria and viruses, as well as ecological hazards through the release of grease, soaps, chemicals, and excessive nitrogen and phosphorus loads into fragile ecosystems.

Although there are many onsite wastewater treatment options, septic systems are by far the most commonly used system because of their relatively low expense and ease of maintenance. There are some situations in which septic systems might not be the most appropriate choice. Land with inadequate soil conditions for the drainfield, high water table, or a close proximity to a body of water might make a septic system a poor choice for wastewater treatment.

Before you buy property, make sure that the local health department will issue a permit for an onsite wastewater treatment system for that site. Some lots - particularly those that are small, rocky, steep, or very close to a waterbody - will not be permitted for a septic system. You should also get your waste treatment system permit before you make other property additions, such as a well, pond, or structure.

Call your local health unit to start the process of getting a septic tank installed. The health unit will send out a Designated Representative to help you site and design an appropriate system. The representative will also be able to give you a list of registered septic tank installers in your area.

Carroll Co. Health Unit 870-423-3514

Madison Co. Health Unit 479-738-1586



This deteriorated tank was still being used by the owners!

- **Do not install your septic system in ground that is commonly saturated.**
- **Have your septic tank checked every 3-5 years.**
- **When moving into a new house—find out the location and current condition of the septic system.**
- **Check your septic tank even if symptoms of failure do not appear.**

Sewage from a malfunctioning septic tank could be leaching into a sinkhole that acts as a direct pathway to our groundwater supply.

Common Questions About Onsite Waste Treatment

Do I have to get a permit for my septic system if I own more than 10 acres of property?

A homeowner who owns a residence on 10 acres or more of property in Carroll and Madison Counties does not have to get a permit for the onsite sewage system as long as that system is located further than 200 feet from a property line. This does not mean that these homeowners are exempt from rules regarding pollution discharge. Homeowners must still make sure that their septic effluent is not polluting neighboring land or waterways.

What are the required setbacks for a private septic system?

- 100 feet from any source of domestic water supply
- 100 feet from the high water mark of any stream or lake
- 50 feet from any pond on same property, 100 feet from pond on adjacent property
- 10 feet from dwelling or building, property line, or water service line

Can I install my own septic tank?

A homeowner can install his/her own septic tank (this means all the work is to be done by the landowner), but this is strongly discouraged by the Health Department. The landowner must still obtain a permit and follow its specifications during installation.

Could I install a holding tank instead of a septic tank?

Holding tanks are basically septic tanks without the outflow pipe. These tanks require regular pumping by a licensed septic tank cleaner. Holding tanks are not legal for either full or part-time residences in Arkansas. They may be approved for certain commercial establishments.

Are composting toilets legal?

Only pre-manufactured composting or incinerating toilets approved under NSF standard 41 can legally be used in an onsite sewage system. Gray water must still go through a septic tank or other approved disinfection procedure. Go to www.healthyarkansas.com for more information.

Do I need to have my septic tank pumped out and if so, how often?

You should have your septic tank checked every 3-5 years. The success of the septic system depends on the length of time that the wastewater spends in the holding tank. The longer the water sits in the tank, the more solids will sink to the bottom and the more grease and soaps will float to the top. Bacteria break down some of these solids, but they cannot keep up with the constant input. Rarely are septic systems built to accommodate more than five years of consistent service without being pumped.

I just moved into a house with a septic system, do I need to do anything immediately?

If you have purchased a pre-existing home with an onsite wastewater treatment system, locate and analyze the state of this system. Many homeowners moving from an area with centralized sewer systems do not realize the responsibility that is involved with an onsite system. In order to protect the environment, as well as your property investment, you must take an active role in the maintenance of your system. For help in locating your septic system, call the Health Department to obtain records of its location. A local septic tank pumper can help you evaluate the health of your system.