

# ON-SITE WASTEWATER TREATMENT SYSTEM MAINTENANCE DURING FLOODS



Since on-site wastewater treatment systems are underground, they are generally not harmed by flood waters. However, it is important to make sure that no damage has occurred and that the system is operating correctly after a flood event. These systems may contain dangerous gases and should only be repaired by a licensed contractor. Contact your local health department for a list of licensed contractors that can repair your system.

Below are some tips to follow before, during, and after a flood event to help keep your system operating correctly.

## BEFORE A FLOOD

- There are several types of systems, and each type may have specific maintenance needs. If you are unfamiliar with the type of system you have, you should contact a professional to determine your system type and specific recommendations for that system.
- Make sure your storm water runoff is as far away as possible from your system.
- Build a mound on top of your system that will divert water away from the system.
- Have a plumber install a back flow preventer, if your home doesn't have one. This device is typically located where your sewer line enters your foundation and will allow water to flow in only one direction. Backwater valves must also be installed at the end of effluent reduction field lines where discharge is less than 12 inches above the ditch flow-line.
- If your system has electrical components, install those components above potential flood levels.
- Watch out for settling: Sludge is the semi-solid material produced by water and wastewater treatment processes. When sludge and scum are allowed to accumulate, the incoming sewage may not be in the tank long enough to break down. These solids may clog the drainfield, which will cause sewage to overflow to the ground surface.

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- How to determine if there is settling in your system:
  - Remove the tank cover.
  - Prepare a dipstick to inspect the sludge depth.
  - Evaluate tank contents – not the level of the liquid in the tank.
  - Evaluate sludge depth – the normal depth for sludge is four inches.
- If the sludge layer is thicker than normal, have the system pumped as soon as possible. Make sure to pump both the tank and the lift station. Do not pump the tank during flooded or saturated drain field conditions.
- Avoid driving over pipes or other septic components at all times.
- On average, septic systems should be inspected every six years and pumped out every eight years.

## DURING A FLOOD

- Do not use the sewage system until water in the absorption trench, or drainfield, is lower than the water level around the house. The absorption trench is the part of a septic system responsible for treating the wastewater that flows from a home's plumbing system and distributing the water into the soil.
- To the best of your ability, prevent silt from entering systems that have a pump chamber. This is done by making sure the system is sealed and is air and water tight.
  - A professional can confirm if your system has a pump chamber or not. Signs that you have a pump chamber include having a nearby electrical panel or a lid on the system that can be removed for inspections.
  - If you have a pump chamber, you may want to consider a fall or winter pump-out.
- Be sure to avoid compacting the soil absorption field by not driving equipment over the area or walking over the area while the soil is saturated. Be aware that soils may continue to be saturated for some time after flood waters recede.
- Do not pump the system or dig into the tank or drainfield while the soil is saturated or flooded. Pumping a system out when the water table is high can result in the system becoming buoyant, damaging itself and plumbing lines.

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## AFTER A FLOOD

- Systems such as aerobic plants, up flow filters, trickling filters, and other media filters may need to be washed and raked due to clogging from mud and sediment.
- If you believe that your system may be damaged, have a licensed contractor inspect the system as soon as possible. Signs of damage include settling, heavy solids building up at the bottom of the tank while greases and lighter solids float to the top, or an inability of the septic tank to accept water.
- Examine all electrical components of the system for damage.
- If your system is an aerobic system with an aerator, make sure it has turned back on after flooding or loss of electricity. Signs of aerator failure include audible alarm or siren from the aerator or overwhelming unpleasant odor where the systems discharges, usually a nearby ditch.
- Ensure that the tank is protected – reseed the vegetation over the tank or provide turf grass if necessary.
- If you also use a well for drinking water and you believe there is damage to your system, avoid drinking the well water until the system is tested. You can have the water tested by contacting your local health department.
- There may be financial assistance to repair systems available after a flood. Contact your local government for more information.

## RESOURCES

*Preparing for Natural Hazards Factsheet Number 3*

Visit our project website: [www.laseagrant.org/resources/be-prepared](http://www.laseagrant.org/resources/be-prepared)

This publication was produced by the Louisiana Sea Grant Law & Policy Program with funding provided in part by NOAA. NA22OAR4170105

*Information is accurate as of February 2025.*

