



# Plumas County Environmental Health

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## GUIDELINES FOR SEPTIC SYSTEMS AFTER A FLOOD

### SEPTIC SYSTEMS

The two major parts of a septic system are the **septic tank** and the **leach field**.

**The Septic Tank**-Wastewater flows from the house into the septic tank where settling occurs. The waste divides into three layers. The heavier solids sink to the bottom of the tank to form the sludge layer, while the lighter solids (like grease or soapsuds) float to the top to form the scum layer. The mostly clear liquid in the middle layer is the effluent.

**The Leach Field**-The effluent leaves the tank and enters a distribution box, which evenly distributes the flow to the leach field. The soil then acts to filter and purify the effluent.

### WHY FLOODING CAUSES PROBLEMS

When flooding or saturated soil conditions persist, a private sewage system cannot function properly.



The leach field relies on aerobic (with oxygen) regions to reduce the amounts of chemicals and living organisms (viruses, bacteria, and protozoa). When the soil is saturated or flooded, the leach field cannot work properly and contaminants can enter the groundwater and your drinking water supply.

### Read all precautions completely before proceeding with your septic system inspection.

- ✓ **DO NOT drink the well water** or use it for cooking, bathing or washing until it is tested for coliform contamination.
- ✓ **DO NOT** use the septic system if the leach field is saturated or flooded.
- ✓ **DO NOT** pump the tank during flooded or saturated soil conditions as the tank may try to float out of the ground and damage the inlet and outlet pipes.
- ✓ **CAUTION—Dangerous gases**—Septic tanks may contain dangerous gases and should only be cleaned and repaired by trained specialists.
- ✓ **CAUTION—Electrical hazards**—If your septic system contains electrical components such as pumps, be sure that electrical power has been turned off before examining equipment.

### Be familiar with your system!!

Locate your septic tank and leach field. Newer septic tanks will have two riser lids at grade covering the two tank manholes. If your system does not have a pump the leach field will be located downgrade from the tank. If effluent is pumped, the field could be located on higher ground and may be unaffected by flooding.

## **WHAT TO DO AFTER THE FLOOD**

- After the water recedes, check the septic system for broken pipes or surfacing sewage.
- Secure or replace any manhole covers to prevent someone from falling into the tank.
- Have your septic tank professionally inspected and serviced if you see signs of damage such as settling or an inability to accept water.
- Septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and debris and must be professionally cleaned.
- Correct any problems before using your system.
- Avoid any work on or around the leach field with heavy equipment while the soil is still wet. These activities will compact the soil and ruin soil percolation.
- Pump systems require power to operate. There is usually only a one day supply of emergency storage space in the pump tank. Sewage may back up into the house if the tank is overfilled.
- Have any silt and debris in the pump tank removed by a professional before operating pump.
- Once power can be safely restored to the pump, switch the pump on and let it run for a **maximum** of 5 minutes and then turn it off. Repeat this manual switching every 6 hours until the pump turns off by itself. This will help prevent the leach field from being oversaturated by prolonged pumping.
- Thoroughly clean any areas where sewage has backed up into the house and disinfect with a chlorine solution of a half cup of unscented household chlorine bleach to one gallon of water.
- Repair erosion damage over the septic tank and leach field. Sod or reseed areas as needed.
- **CONSERVE WATER** as much as possible while the system restores itself and the water table falls.

**Additional information available at:** [www.epa.gov/safewater/faq/emergency\\_septic.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/faq/emergency_septic.html)

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[www.countyofplumas.us](http://www.countyofplumas.us)