GUIDANCE FOR SEPTIC SYSTEMS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH AND SEPTIC SYSTEM

Safety Reminders

- Mark system components with a marker such as a rock, stake, or pin flag.
- Turn off electricity to the system at the circuit breaker.
- Turn off your pump at the circuit box if you have a pressure distribution or mound system.

Before the Earthquake

Take these steps to reduce the effects of an impending earthquake on your septic system.
- Maintain your septic system.
- Know your septic system and take pictures or keep documents of the following to reference later if there is damage:
  - Septic tank location.
  - Septic system records or drawings.
  - Electrical components.

- Get help from a septic system service professional for steps with this symbol 🗳.
- Steps with a 🚫 only apply to pressure distribution systems.
- Get help from a septic system service professional if any of the steps feel unsafe in your situation or your system loses power.
- Make sure power to the septic system is off before inspecting the area.
- Be careful walking near a damaged system.
- Wait to enter damaged structures until they are cleared by a trained inspector.
- Wear gloves and eye protection when inspecting your septic system.
- Never enter the pump chamber or septic tank.

During the Earthquake

- Follow emergency and evacuation advice for your area.
- Eliminate all non-essential water use and flush toilets as little as possible if evacuation is not needed.
- Try to find other toilets if your septic system is damaged. If there are not toilets available, see the guidance on temporary toilets below.

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After the Earthquake

Consult with a septic system service professional and follow the steps below.
- Rope off your septic system. The manhole and tank covers may be damaged or missing.
- Stay out of the area if sewage backs up. If the entire building is contaminated, abandon the building until all affected areas have been cleaned. A septic system service professional should be contacted to inspect and repair the system if it was flooded.
- Check for changes in how the septic system functions. Be on the alert for changes in how appliances drain, wet or unusually green spots in your yard, odors from your system, activated alarm lights and buzzers, and/or a change in sounds from mechanical components. Contact a septic system service professional if any of these issues occur.
- Reduce water use until the system is inspected:
  - Avoid sending basement sump pump water into the septic system.
  - Re-route water from roof gutters away from the drain field area.
  - Take short showers
  - Limit laundry and dishwashing
  - Turn off the water while brushing teeth, shaving, or rinsing dishes
  - Do not flush the toilet each time it’s used for liquid waste.

- Use a five-gallon bucket as a toilet. You can add a toilet seat and set it up like a modified toilet (above).
- If you must dig a hole for your waste, make sure it’s at least 200 feet (70 adult steps) from water bodies and at least six inches deep. Fill it in after a single use, tamp the dirt down. This is a short-term option only and regulations may vary by jurisdiction.

### Professional System Inspection

Contact a septic system service professional for an inspection before using the septic system again. An inspection may include the following:

- Open all parts of the system and see if debris entered the system. All sewage tanks should be pumped and cleaned out.
- Check for damage to above and below ground septic system components.
- Check for damage to piping where pipes enter the home.
- Make sure that inspection ports are free of blockage and damage. Replace and secure septic tank manhole covers as needed.
- Check the drain field and the area over the septic tank for depressions and damage from fallen debris. Repair with sod or seeding to provide good plant cover.
- Make sure wastewater moves between the parts of the system as intended.
- If your property was damaged, a month after the system is restarted, schedule a follow-up visit to check for proper operation.

### OTHER SYSTEMS

If you have an advanced treatment unit or any other type of onsite wastewater treatment system not addressed above, contact a septic system service professional or your local health department.

**Temporary Toilets**

Only use a temporary toilet if there are no functioning toilets available.
- Check to see if you can stay somewhere else.
- Contract a PortaPotty for temporary use.
- Modify your own toilet:
  - Shut off the water valve to the toilet. If you can’t close it, try another option.
  - Flush out any water still in the bowl.
  - Line your toilet bowl (under the seat) with a plastic kitchen garbage bag inside of another kitchen bag.
  - Into the inner bag, put some kitty litter, dry peat moss, lime, or something similar that will absorb liquid.
  - Do not mix urine and fecal material if possible.
  - After using the toilet, close the inner plastic bag with a plastic tie or other method.
  - Wash or sanitize your hands after toilet use and waste handling.
  - Store full bags in a secure area. Consider a watertight bucket or trashcan.
  - Dispose of the bags when possible.