

# GUIDANCE FOR SEPTIC SYSTEMS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER WINTER WEATHER

## STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH AND SEPTIC SYSTEM

### Safety Reminders

- 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 accessing your system. Freezing temperatures, ice, and heavy snowfall may be present.
- 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.

### Before the Winter

Take these steps to reduce the effects of winter weather 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.
- **Check for and repair any leaking plumbing fixtures.**
- **Let the grass in your lawn get longer.**
- **Consider wrapping your pipes with heat tape** if you have high-efficiency appliances.

- **Make sure the land around the manhole covers is sloped downwards.**
- **Avoid compacting the soil around the system.** Never allow vehicle traffic or livestock above the tanks or on the drain field.
-  **Check with a septic system service professional before doing any landscaping.**
-  **Consider adding more insulation to the system if your system is new, you have had issues with freezing in the past, or you have a mound system.** Contact a septic system service professional for more information.
-  **Check for open, broken or uncapped risers, inspection pipes, or manhole covers** and contact a septic system service professional for repairs.
-  **Check for any water pooling near the drain field** and contact a septic system service professional for repairs.

### During the Winter

- **If you will be gone for more than a week leave the heat on in your home** and consider having someone come by and run warm water.
- **Eliminate all non-essential water use** and flush toilets as little as possible if evacuation is not needed.
- **Limit all traffic above and near the system** during freezing temperatures.
- **Avoid removing or compacting snow above the system.**
  - **If you feel the system starting to freeze use warm water and spread out your laundry and dishwasher schedule.** Do not leave water running.
-  **If you will be gone for several months, follow the steps listed above and check with a septic system service professional about having your septic tank pumped.**
-  **If your septic system freezes call a septic system service professional.** Do not add anything to the system, start a fire, or pump the tank.

- 🔧 **If you hear water constantly running into a pump tank or the pump turning on and off your system may be frozen.** Shut off your pump and call a septic system service professional.
- 🔧 **If your septic system cannot be repaired, contact a septic system service professional** about using the septic tank as a holding tank.

## After the Winter

- 🔧 **Always contact a septic system service professional for an inspection after winter ends.** Whether or not the system is frozen, an annual spring inspection is always recommended. The ground may be saturated from snow melt and could cause the system to flood.
- 🔧 **If you experienced issues with your septic system freezing contact a septic system service professional** about installing insulated pipes or adding insulation to manhole covers.

## Professional System Inspection

### Contact a septic system service professional for an inspection after winter ends.

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 the tanks for water tightness and structural defects such as cracking or breakage from freezing.
- 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 erosion damage. Repair with sod or seeding to provide good plant cover.
- Make sure wastewater moves between the parts of the system as intended
- About 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 and the winter weather is expected to last several days.**

- 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.**
- **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.