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.

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.

- 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.
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.

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.