

TRANSPORTATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES

ONSITE WASTEWATER PROGRAM

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On-Site Sewage Facilities (OSSF or 'Septic Systems') -What to Do After the Flood-

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):



Where can I find information on my septic system (OSSF)?

For a copy of records on your OSSF contact Travis County Transportation and Natural Resources Records Division to make an open records request at (512) 854-7683 or TNR.openrecords@co.travis.tx.us

Do I pump my tank during flooded or saturated drainfield conditions?

No! At best pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. Under worst conditions, pumping it out could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes. The best solution is to plug all drains in the lowest level of the building and drastically reduce water use.

What if my OSSF has been used to dispose of wastewater from my business or for chemicals?

Although it is illegal to dispose of harsh chemicals into an OSSF, sometimes they have been introduced into a system. If your system has been used to dispose of harsh chemicals and it backs up into the building or drainfield, be sure to take extra precautions to prevent skin, eye and inhalation contact. The proper clean-up depends on the chemicals in wastewater. Contact TCEQ or EPA for guidance on clean-up.

What do I do with my OSSF after the flood?

- Once floodwaters have receded, there are several things homeowners should remember:
- Do not use the sewage system until water in the soil absorption field is lower than the level around the house and the no longer over the tanks or drainfield.
- Have your OSSF tank(s) professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling or an inability to accept water. Most tanks are not damaged by flooding since they are below ground and completely covered. However, tanks can fill with silt and debris, and must be professionally cleaned. If the drainfield is clogged with silt, a new system may need to be installed.
- Only trained and licensed specialists should clean or repair tanks. Avoid opening tanks lids as tanks may contain dangerous gases.
- If sewage has backed up into the building, clean the area and disinfect the floor. Use a chlorine solution of half a cup of household bleach to each gallon of water to disinfect the area thoroughly.

- Pump the OSSF as soon as possible after the flood has receded. Be sure to pump all tanks including pump tanks. This will remove silt and debris that may have washed into the system. Do not pump the tanks during flooded or saturated conditions as it could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes
- Do not compact the soil over the drainfield by driving or operating equipment in the area. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can reduce the drainfield's ability to treat and disposal of wastewater and can lead to system failure.
- Examine all electrical connections for damage before restoring electricity
- Be sure tank riser lids/covers are secure and that inspections ports have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the vegetation over your tank(s) and drainfield(s). Repair erosion damage and sod or reseed areas as necessary to ensure vegetative cover.

What are some suggestions offered by experts for owners with flooded OSSFs?

- Use common sense. If possible, don't use the system if the system is saturated or flooded. The wastewater will not be treated or absorbed, and can become a source of pollution. Conserve water as much as possible while the system restores itself and water table falls.
- Prevent silt from entering the tank(s). Silt has a tendency to settle in chambers and can clog the drainfield if not removed.
- Do not open the septic tank for pumping while the soil is still saturated. Mud and silt may enter the tank(s) and end up in the drainfield(s). Furthermore, pumping out a tank that is in saturated soil may cause it to "pop out" of the ground. (Likewise, recently install systems may "pop out" of the ground more readily than older systems because the soil has not had enough time to settle and compact.
- Do not dig into the tank or drainfield areas while the soil is still wet or flooded. Try to avoid any work on or around the drainfield(s) with heavy machinery while the soil is still wet. These activities can ruin the soil conductivity.
- Flooding of the trash or septic tank can lift floating crust of fats and grease (scum layer) and partially plug an outlet or inlet tee. If sewage backs up into the building, check the tees for blockage first. Clean up any floodwater in the building without dumping into the sinks or toilets and allow enough time for water to recede. Floodwaters from the building than are passed through or pumped through the OSSF can cause higher flows through the system. This can cause solids to transfer through tanks and into the drainfield causing clogging.
- Locate any electrical or mechanical components of the OSSF (if any) that may have been flooded. Avoid contact with those components until they are dry and clean.
- Advanced systems (aerobic units, filtration units, sand and media filters, etc) have a tendency to clog due to mud and sediment. These systems will need to be remediated prior to use.

Remember:

Whenever the water table is high or your OSSF is threatened by flooding, there is risk of sewage backing up into the building. The only way to prevent this back up is to relieve pressure on the system by using less or not at all. OSSF's should not be used if saturated or covered by flood waters.