WHAT TO EXPECT DURING A

SEPTIC SYSTEM FIRST MAINTENANCE INSPECTION

Regular maintenance of your septic system will keep your system working efficiently and can prevent costly repairs. Inspections also can save you money by preventing unnecessary pump-outs, and a well-maintained system helps protect water quality.

The first maintenance inspection provides baseline information about your system. You are encouraged to observe the inspection, using the checklist of standard RI DEM procedures below, so that you can have confidence in the results. If you believe the inspection was not completed properly, please contact your local wastewater management authority.

WHAT WILL THE INSPECTOR DO?

1. Determine Property Information

The inspector needs a copy of the permit or design plan, which you can provide, if you have one. The inspector also will ask about everyday water use practices in order to better understand how well your system is functioning.

- ❒ Determine the age of the system.
- ❒ Determine the type of system.
- ❒ Determine household appliances present.

2. Evaluate the Site

- ❒ Check for impermeable surfaces, heavy objects, or large trees over the drainfield.
- ❒ Check for odors, ponding, or soggy areas.
- ❒ Check vegetation such as lush green grass or burnt-out grass.
- ❒ Check the landscape position for possible runoff.

3. Locate the System

- ❒ Locate and expose all access ports.
- ❒ Locate the approximate location of the drainfield.
- ❒ Sketch a diagram of components with measurements.

The tool shown is used to measure the depth of sludge and scum layers. If those layers comprise at least 35% of the tank's storage capacity, your tank will need a pump-out.

4. Evaluate the Tank

- ❒ Determine the size of the tank.
- ❒ Check the effluent level in the tank. Effluent levels can indicate potential problems with leaks or drainfields.
- ❒ Record solids accumulation.
- ❒ Check the condition of baffles.
  Baffles are critical because they control the flow of suspended solids within the tank and help prevent their exit to the drainfield.
- ❒ Check the overall structure of the tank.

5. Pump-Out

Pump-outs are highly recommended as part of a thorough first maintenance inspection. A pump-out performed during an inspection should include the following tasks.

Check with your town hall for specific pump-out requirements.

- ❒ Check for drainback to the tank from the leachfield.
- ❒ Check the condition of the tank weep hole and midseam.
- ❒ Check the overall structure of the empty tank.

6. Check the Effluent Screen if Present

Effluent screens (also called outlet screens) are recommended as an inexpensive preventative measure.

- ❒ Check if the screen needs cleaning.
- ❒ Hose the screen off into the inlet side of the septic tank.
- ❒ Recommend a cleaning interval.

7. Provide Results and Recommendations

- ❒ Evaluate the overall system.
- ❒ Identify any needed repairs or upgrades.
- ❒ Complete recommendations and suggest a routine maintenance schedule.
- ❒ Submit required documentation to the homeowner and to the town.

Homeowners Tips for the Inspection

- Get multiple quotes from town-approved inspectors.
- Ask the inspector about discounts for inspecting and pumping at the same time.
- Ask the inspector about discounts if you locate and uncover the tank yourself.
- Prepare the information that the inspector will need (such as the system design plan and water bills) prior to his arrival.
- If possible, be home when the inspection occurs so that you can answer questions from the inspector and ask questions about the functioning of your system.
- Be sure that the inspector recommends a routine maintenance and pumping schedule. This will vary depending upon the type of system you have, the number of people in your household, and how much water you use.
- Be sure to get a copy of the inspection report from the inspector.

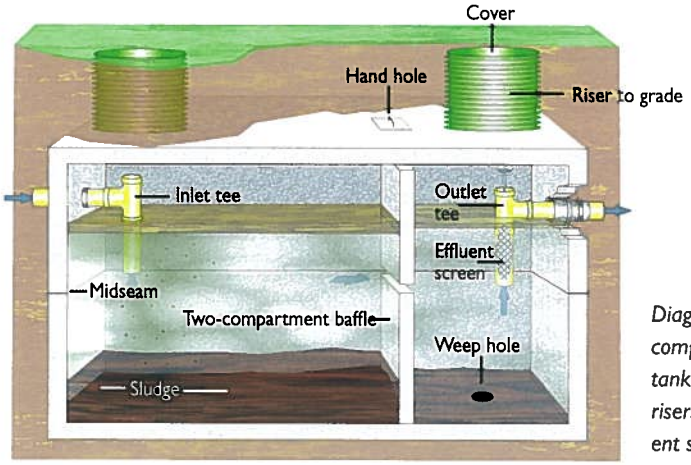

Diagram of a two-compartment septic tank with access risers and an effluent screen.

Additional Information Is Available

This series also includes fact sheets about routine maintenance, pump-outs, and recommended septic system upgrades such as effluent screens and access risers. Additional information is available at: www.uri.edu/ce/wq or call the URI Onsite Wastewater Training Center at 401-874-5950.

Septic System Checkup: The Rhode Island Handbook for Inspection. RI Department of Environmental Management. Available at www.state.RI.us/dem. Additional information is available at: www.uri.edu/ce/wq/owtc/html/owtc.html

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