

FACT SHEET

SEPTIC SYSTEMS

Through the Docktalk program, FOCA encourages landowners to look after their septic systems.

WHY? Problems can arise with septic systems that have serious impacts, including:

Overload/leaking of sewage

A septic system is designed to treat a set volume of waste water. Every time water goes down the drain into your septic tank, the same amount of liquid leaves the tank and enters the leaching bed. If too much waste water enters the tank, from extra guests, heavy water use - too much waste is forced out, too soon. Untreated waste water escapes, including solids that can clog up pipes and/or enter the leaching bed, as well.

Wiped out waste digesters

Sewage is broken down by millions of bacteria and enzymes in your septic tank and soil within the leaching bed. That bacteria is harmed or killed by (1) cleaning products that are antibacterial, non-biodegradable, chlorine-based and/or full of toxic materials; and (2) hazardous products like varnish, paint, pesticides, and gasoline.

Water quality affected, algal blooms erupt, and nuisance plants choke the lake

Septic systems were designed with public health in mind. They are designed to remove contaminants such as organic solids, bacteria, and viruses, but not to prevent the release of nutrients. Nitrogen and phosphorus released from septic systems can negatively impact water quality and cause algal blooms and increased growth of aquatic plants. Excess nitrogen can also pollute drinking water, endangering people.

Build up of solids

There's a lot that can't be digested by your septic system. Fats, grease, and oils don't break down, and can form a scum layer at the top of your septic tank. Paper products, coffee grounds, hair, tampons, and other common sewage items inhibit the work of bacteria and quickly fill tanks. Combined, they can clog the system significantly hampering your septic's effectiveness.

Poisoning yourself

Hazardous products (paint, varnish, pesticides, gasoline, antifreeze) dumped down your drain, come out of the septic system just like they went in, but now they're in the ground and water with the potential to poison wells and lakes.

Contaminated drinking water and swimming areas

If your sewage is leaking, not getting cleaned, or building up, the end result could be contaminated water entering wells, ground water, lakes, streams, etc. Your health and the environment's health are at risk.

A septic system treats your waste water and sewage. Your household drains connect to a septic tank and a leaching bed. Both are buried beside your cottage. The leaching bed is made up of pipes (with holes) buried in gravel, surrounded by natural or imported soil.

Find out what you can do to keep your septic safe...

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HOW?

FOCA encourages landowners to learn the following septic slogans that will keep you on the right track to a healthy lake:

What goes in must come out

To allow waste water the time it needs to be treated in the tank, conserve water. Ensure the size of your system can handle the quantity of waste water you create. Many older septic systems may be grossly undersized.

Don't poison your poop processor

The importance of using biodegradable, non-toxic shampoos, detergents, soaps, and cleaners can't be stressed enough. Many products in your cottage are loaded weapons. Make septic-friendly products the popular choice!

Nutrients not needed

Keep the input of phosphorus to a minimum. Use low-phosphate or phosphate-free cleaners.

Have an inspector visit every 3 to 5 years

Regular maintenance is one of the most important steps. Get an inspection and your tank pumped every three to five years. Replacing or repairing a septic system (and its impacts) is expensive; maintenance keeps thousands of dollars in your pocket and emergencies at bay.

It's not a garbage can

Don't put garbage (i.e. non-biodegradable items) down your drain. That includes grease, fats, oil, and paper products.

Location, location, location

Soils play a big role in how water travels from the leaching bed, what contaminants get absorbed/broken down, and how far they travel. Your septic system must be designed for the type of soil around your cottage. Make sure your system meets the rules (Ontario Building Code) that control how far a septic tank and leaching bed can be built away from buildings, wells, and waterbodies.

Plants not trees

Plant with caution in the nutrient-rich area above the leaching bed. Do not plant trees or shrubs within three metres of the tank or bed. Roots will seek out and crack your pipes. Shallow-rooted ground covers are ideal.

Resources online:

www.foca.on.ca
www.ecoethic.ca
www.orwc.uoguelph.ca
www.cpaontario.com
www.omafra.gov.on.ca
www.oowa.org

Your local contact: