On-Site Sewage Facility FAQs

I'm having an OSSF installed. What are some tips I can follow?

- Have a site evaluation performed in the area where you want the disposal field built.
- Based upon the results, select a type of treatment and disposal system that is suitable for your property.
- Factors to consider:
    - Initial capital cost.
    - Ongoing operation and maintenance cost—
        - maintenance contract requirements (if a maintenance contract is required, ask how much the continuous contract will cost after the first two years);
        - routine repairs; and
        - replacement of mechanical parts.
    - Expected life span of the system.
- After you have selected your system, you must submit planning materials to Washington County Environmental Health Dept. for us to authorize you to begin building the system.
- Find an installer who seems to fit your requirements.
    - Check references.
    - Interview the installer by phone and/or in person.
    - Ask lots of questions.
    - Obtain at least three estimates. If all are close, you have a good bid. If two are close, call the one that is not close and try to find out what the installer is missing or has added to the bid. If all three are far apart, you may want to obtain additional estimates from different installers.
    - Think twice before hiring the first installer you meet, or choosing the one with the cheapest estimate.
- Work out all the details. Document every decision, selection, and location. Avoid designing as you go, which may result in a failed construction inspection that could cost you more money.
- Do not pay large sums of money in advance.
- Insist on good service, good manners, and sound business practices.

- Trust your instincts and use common sense.
- Have a third party available whom you can call on for information or a second opinion.

How can I make sure my OSSF works properly?

Most important is to keep in mind that your OSSF is not a city sewer. Treat it right, feed it properly and it will provide efficient service. While operating your OSSF, remember these *do*s and *don't*s:

DO:

- Have your tank pumped and cleaned by a TCEQ registered sludge hauler. For conventional systems in average situations, it is recommended that you pump your septic tank every three to five years to prevent short circuiting of the treatment process. For aerobic treatment units, it depends on the depth of sludge and the manufacturer's recommendations.
- Obtain and follow information on conserving water from your water supplier.
- Check your toilet for leaks periodically. Add a water-based dye to the flush tank and see if the dye appears in your toilet within 10 minutes (without flushing the toilet).

DON'T:

- Build over any part of your on-site sewage disposal system. Examples of items **not to** construct over your system: driveways, barns, storage buildings, sidewalks, and patios.
- Add chemical additives or the so-called enzymes into your OSSF. Some of these additives may even be harmful to the tank's operation.
- Use the toilet to dispose of cleaning tissues, cigarette butts, or other trash. This disposal practice will waste water and burden the treatment system with an undesirable load of solids.
- Drive or park vehicles over the OSSF.

My OSSF is failing. What do I need to do?

First, determine what is causing the failure. Common causes are:

1. *Hydraulic overloading*
    - To determine if your system is hydraulically overloaded, check your water usage records and compare the average gallons used per day with the amount specified in the system design.
        1. If you are using more than what was designed, your system is hydraulically overloaded. You will need to reduce the amount of water

being discharged into your OSSF or enlarge the system (which requires a permit).

2. If your water usage is less than the design, proceed to the next item.

2. *Misidentification of soil or site conditions*

    1. Before February 4, 1997, the most common way an OSSF was designed was based on percolation tests. Unfortunately, the percolation test did not address any limiting factors to a depth of two feet below the bottom of the drainfield or address the soil texture in the disposal area.

    2. Subsurface water flow within the disposal field, subsurface restrictive horizons below the disposal field, or seasonally saturated soils will cause OSSF failure and requires corrective action by the property owner.

3. *Organic overloading*

    - This most commonly occurs where food is prepared. A five-day biochemical oxygen-demand test would need to be run on the effluent (wastewater leaving the septic tank).

        1. The rules assume the five-day biochemical oxygen demand (BOD_5) of the effluent to be 140 mg/l.

        2. If there is a large amount of food, grease, blood, or the like leaving the facility and entering the septic tank, the disposal field is most likely organically overloaded.

4. *Poor maintenance*

    1. A septic tank should be pumped every three to five years.

    2. A system using secondary treatment or drip irrigation must be inspected by a valid maintenance company regularly; per the schedule established by your permitting authority.

5. *Age*

    1. If your OSSF is over 15 years old, repairs may not fix the problem and the system may need to be replaced.

If an existing OSSF, regardless of the date of installation, is required to have a tank replaced or a drainfield repaired or replaced, a permit is required. When a permit is required, the entire system must be brought up to current standards.

If the tank can be repaired without having to remove the tank, the work is considered an emergency repair and a permit is not required. Routine maintenance such as tank pumping also does not require a permit; however, you should receive a Manifest from the sludge hauler and keep it for your records.

What type of chlorine should I use for wastewater disinfection?

When the type of system installed requires disinfection and you are using chlorine tablets, it is important that you use the correct kind of chlorine tablet. Calcium Hypochlorite tablets certified by EPA for wastewater effluent disinfection must be used; they are very reactive and will quickly kill 99% of the bacteria present in the effluent, while the chlorine residual dissipates rapidly to reduce damage to the receiving environment. Follow all warning and precaution statements of the chlorine tablet manufacturer to protect yourself and the system equipment.

WARNING: DO NOT use swimming pool chlorine tablets in your disinfection system. These tablets are chlorinated isocyanurates, which may also be referred to as “tri-chlors”. These tablets dissolve too slowly, do not thoroughly disinfect the effluent, and create chlorine residual that remains for long periods of time to damage the receiving environment. Additionally, there is a danger of explosion using swimming pool tablets since the tablets will release an explosive gas called nitrogen chloride due to the fact that they are not totally immersed in water at all times while in use. They are not approved by EPA for wastewater effluent disinfection.