



Coos County Community Development

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SEPTIC SYSTEM MAINTENANCE & INSTALLATION FACT SHEET

- **Background: Why Septic Systems Matter**

In areas without access to municipal sewer systems, an Onsite Wastewater Treatment System, commonly known as a septic system, is used to treat and dispose of household sewage, including greywater. These systems are critical to protecting public health, water quality, and the environment. A typical system consists of a septic tank and a drainfield (soil absorption system), where solids are separated, and effluent is filtered and treated through soil before returning to the water cycle.

- **How a Septic System Works**

The septic tank is a watertight container that holds wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle to the bottom as sludge, while fats and oils float to the top as scum. The remaining liquid (effluent) flows to the drainfield, where it percolates through soil for further treatment. A properly designed system retains wastewater in the tank for at least 24 hours, allowing up to 50% of solids to decompose.

Only human waste and white toilet paper should be flushed. No chemical or biological additives are required and can do more harm than good. The drainfield depends on unsaturated, oxygen-rich soil to function. If solids enter the drainfield, it can become clogged, leading to failure and costly repairs.

- **Maintaining and Servicing Your Septic System**

Sludge and scum build up over time and reduce the tank's efficiency. Starting in year three, have your tank checked annually. When solids exceed 35% of the tank's volume, it must be pumped. A DEQ-licensed septic pumper should pump and clean the tank through the central access port (never the baffle ports). Before re-covering the tank, inspect and replace deteriorated baffles with sanitary tees. Never enter a septic tank—toxic gases can be fatal. Always ensure good ventilation and have someone nearby when inspecting or servicing from the outside.

Install a watertight riser with a gasketed cover extending at least one inch above ground for easier access. Do not bury the cover. Pumping frequency depends on household size and water use. For example, a 1,000-gallon tank serving four people typically needs pumping every 3 years; for two people, every 6 years. Homes with garbage disposals or high-water use require more frequent service.

- **Installing a New Septic System: Procedures & Criteria**

- **Where is a Septic System Needed?**

A septic system is required anywhere sewer service is unavailable, usually in rural or remote areas, to safely treat and dispose of wastewater.

- **Why Are Permits Required?**

Permits ensure that septic systems are properly sited, designed, and constructed to protect both public health and the environment. In Oregon, the onsite program is either managed by the **Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)** or delegated to the **county government** acting as DEQ's agent.

- **What Permit Do I Need?**

Most residential properties require a Construction-Installation Permit for systems with a projected flow under 2,500 gallons per day. These permits are valid for one year, with the option to renew for a fee. For systems serving commercial properties or with larger flows, contact DEQ at (503) 229-6504 or (800) 452-4011 (toll-free in Oregon).

- **Permit Process Overview**

There are two main steps to permitting:

- **Step 1: Site Evaluation**

A Site Evaluation determines whether a septic system can be installed on a given property, and what type is suitable.

- **Evaluation Criteria:** Soil type and depth, water table depth, property size and slope, proximity to wells and waterbodies, and space for a replacement system (per OAR 340 Divisions 071 and 073).
- **Application Process:**
 1. Submit a completed application, tax lot map, property drawing, and directions.
 2. Provide at least two test pits, 75 feet apart (more for larger systems), dug in the proposed drainfield area.
 3. An onsite specialist will evaluate the site, typically within 3–5 weeks, depending on the season and weather.
 4. You will receive a Site Evaluation Report detailing the approved area, system type/size, and any special requirements.
 5. If denied, you may submit additional test pits within 90 days at no extra charge or apply for a variance.

- **Step 2: Construction-Installation Permit**

After a favorable Site Evaluation, you may apply for a Construction-Installation Permit.

- **Permit Application Must Include:**

- Site Evaluation Report
- Planning and Sanitation Pre-Application Worksheet
- Vicinity/locator map
- Detailed Site Development Plan and directions
- System design and specifications (prepared by owner or DEQ-licensed installer)

- **Approval Timeline:** Within 20 days of receiving a complete application

- **Installation and Inspection:**

- Installation must match the approved design.
- A pre-cover inspection is required unless waived by the onsite agent.
- Complex systems (e.g., sand filters) may require staged inspections.
- The installer must submit the As-Built Drawing and Materials List, signed and certified.
- Within 7 days of receiving this form, the onsite agent will either waive or perform the inspection.
- After approval, you'll receive a Certificate of Satisfactory Completion (CSC)—at that point, you may use the system.

- **Test Pit Preparation for Onsite Site Evaluations**

- **When is a Test Pit Required?**

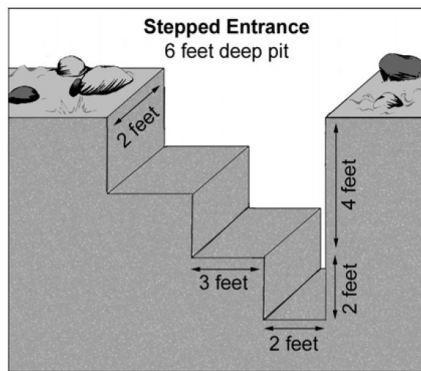
A test pit is required when you apply for a permit to construct an onsite sewage disposal system. A County inspector will perform a Site Evaluation at the proposed location, and the test pit allows them to visually inspect the soil type, depth, and subsurface layers. These factors are critical in determining whether your property is suitable for a septic system.

- **How to Prepare a Test Pit:**

To ensure safety and proper evaluation, test pits must be stable, clearly visible, and accessible. Each standard test pit must be:

- At least 2 feet wide and 4 feet long
- Between 4.5 and 5 feet deep (unless rock or water table is encountered sooner)
- Excavated in a way that provides stable walls for inspection

If hard rock or groundwater is encountered before reaching 5 feet, the pit may be shallower. However, in some cases, the inspector may request deeper test pits, up to 6 feet, to fully assess site conditions. Refer to the illustrations provided in this guide for visual examples of proper pit dimensions and structure.



The entrance to a 6-foot test pit may be sloped or stepped as soil conditions warrant.

