

Onsite Waste Water Management Systems – Before and After Flooding

Overland flooding in rural and cottage areas can greatly affect septic systems. Overland flood water can make holding tanks or septic tanks float up, out of the ground, if they are buried in a shallow hole, don't have weights or security measures to hold them in place. Flood water can get inside the tank through a leaky riser or loose cover. If flood water gets into your holding tank or septic tank, it can damage the system or even shut it down.

Sewage waste water (effluent) will generally not leak out of a septic field that is covered with flood water. Hydraulic pressure from the flood water and the septic field will maintain a balance so sewage will not leak out, unless your septic field is already leaking. Waves or floating debris can cause damage to the septic field that will end up causing leaks.

To reduce the risk of damage to your septic system – inside and outside flood protected areas – take these steps, especially if you need to evacuate.

Before flooding

- Examine the holding and/or septic tank (tank) to make sure the riser is above grade and the tank lid is watertight.
- If the tank is not buried deep, make sure it's secure and properly anchored down.
- Make sure pumps and alarms are in good working order.
- Make sure the septic field is in good working condition and repair any leaks.
- Remove any debris that may float and cause damage to the field.
- Reduce the amount of waste water going into the septic system.
- Do not pump the tank empty because it makes the tank buoyant and it's more likely to float.

During and after flooding

- Don't use using the plumbing system if the septic tank and field have been flooded.
- Hire a registered sewage hauler to pump out the tank if it has taken on flood water.
- Don't touch any of the wiring or electrical parts of the system.
- If the tank has been damaged, hire a certified installer to assess the system and to do the necessary repairs.
- Don't touch sewage from overflowing tanks or malfunctioning septic fields. Raw sewage contains micro-organisms that can cause disease.
- If unexpected flooding occurred in a cottage area, write down the addresses of the affected cottages and notify the property owners so they can assess and repair the damage.

- If you smell sewage or waste water, it could be caused by loose tank covers. It could also happen if the tank has been disconnected to the building's drainpipe, or if the septic field has been damaged. These odours will fade quickly once repairs have been done.
- For more information, contact the Onsite Wastewater Management System Program's co-ordinator at 204-945-2970 in Winnipeg.