

How often do I need to perform operations & maintenance inspections (O&M) on my septic system?



State and county regulations require:

-Gravity and pump to gravity OSS are inspected at least once every three years.

-Most other systems (pressure distribution, sand filters, sand mounds, etc.) must be inspected annually, unless more frequent inspections are specified by the manufacturer or local health officer (ex. OSS with an aerobic treatment unit for a pretreatment device).

Do I need to hire a professional O&M provider to inspect my system?

-Homeowners MAY provide their own O&M service on gravity, pressure distribution, sand mound, and sand filter systems.

-OSS containing proprietary products, must be inspected by a professional O&M provider, licensed by the county, with specific training for the device due to the complexity of the system. (Proprietary systems are patented systems that provide extra treatment to systems in difficult locations, i.e. subsurface drip systems & aerobic treatment units.) Contact the Environmental Health Unit for a full list of licensed O&M providers.

Do I need to attend a class before I inspect my septic system?

-There is NO required training for gravity and pump to gravity O&M, however the county recommends attending one of our FREE classes.

-Homeowners must attend a county approved training session prior to performing an O&M inspection on any other system, including pressure distribution.

What does operation and maintenance of a septic system involve?

There are many types of on-site septic systems that are installed in Cowlitz County. Each system has its own characteristics that need to be inspected and maintained. There are a few features that most systems have in common, the septic tank & the drainfield.



The first basic part of the O&M inspection is the monitoring of the layers of scum and sludge inside the septic tank (see brochure titled “Is It Time to Pump” for more information.) This simple monitoring and timely pumping can greatly extend the life of your system.

The second basic part is evaluating the drainfield. If your drainfield was installed after 2004, you might have observation ports. You should look inside of these to see if there is excessive ponding (>6”) in the trench. If you do not have these, at a minimum, the drainfield area should be examined for squishy spots, ponding water that looks like it has a sheen to it, and “happy grass” (dark green stripes in your lawn, seen in photo above).



SEPTIC SYSTEM OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

Frequently Asked Questions



For comments or questions, please contact:
Cowlitz County Health Department
Environmental Health Unit
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FAX: (360)425-7531
http://www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/health_o&mseptic@co.cowlitz.wa.us

Do I need to pump my tank at each inspection?

MAYBE. The determination for pumping your tank is based on the solids & scum accumulation in the tank, and will vary depending on use. See the brochure titled “Is It Time to Pump” for more information.

What types of classes or trainings are available for me to do my own operations and maintenance?



The County is presenting a **FREE** homeowner O&M class, on a regular basis, in conjunction with the WSU Extension office. Call the Environmental Health Unit or WSU for the next scheduled class.

How do I report my inspection?

The Environmental Health Unit has forms to complete based on the type of OSS you have on your property. If you have a pre-treatment device, such as a sand filter, there is a supplemental form to complete in addition to the basic O&M Report. The Environmental Health Unit also has instructional guides to assist you in completing the form properly. If forms are incomplete or missing pertinent information, they will be returned to the maintenance provider / homeowner.

What should I do if I find a problem during my routine inspection?

Any system problems identified during the inspection should be **noted on the O&M Report** and corrected in a timely manner. Depending on the nature of the repair, a repair permit may be required. Please contact the Environmental Health Unit regarding potential repairs to your septic system.

Why do I need to perform Operations and Maintenance on my system?

1. Protect your investment in your property.

Look at it from this perspective: You can spend a few dollars, or some of your time every year to maintain your septic system or you can spend \$20,000 or more to replace it. In the long run, it makes more sense to spend a little effort every year and save a significant amount of money in the long run. Your septic system will not last forever. The EPA and Washington Department of Health estimate that the average life expectancy of a septic system is only 20 to 30 years. However, poorly maintained and operated systems can fail in only a year or two. While well maintained systems can surpass the 30 year mark. It is similar to owning a car. You spend a large amount of money to purchase it even though you know that its life expectancy is less than twenty years. You also know that if you perform regular service on the vehicle it will run better and last longer.



2. Protect your health and your neighbors.



Under-treated sewage contains organisms that can cause life-threatening diseases. If your septic system is poorly maintained these organisms can enter the environment and threaten the health & welfare of children, household pets, and even wild animals.

3. Pumping your septic tank when it is needed can save you money.

Many people think that the septic tank is the most expensive part of their system. As it turns out replacing a septic tank is relatively inexpensive compared to replacing the rest of the system. It is important to check your septic tank because you can extend the life of your system. When septic tanks are not pumped as needed, sludge from the tank begins to enter the drainfield and clog the soil pores. When the soil pores become plugged the drainfield stops functioning correctly and the system fails. Pumping the tank when it is needed will keep sludge out of your drainfield and extend the life of your system.



4. Under-treated sewage leads to environmental issues.

Washington State University and the State Department of Ecology, authored a study on Silver Lake. The study concluded that under-treated and un-treated septic sewage was partially to blame for the algae and plant blooms that are causing problems at the lake.

5. It is the Law.

This is everybody's least favorite answer but it is still the fact. State and County rules require homeowners to perform regular O&M on their system. Washington Administrative Code 246-272A-0270 and Cowlitz County Code Chapter 15.42 explain the requirements.