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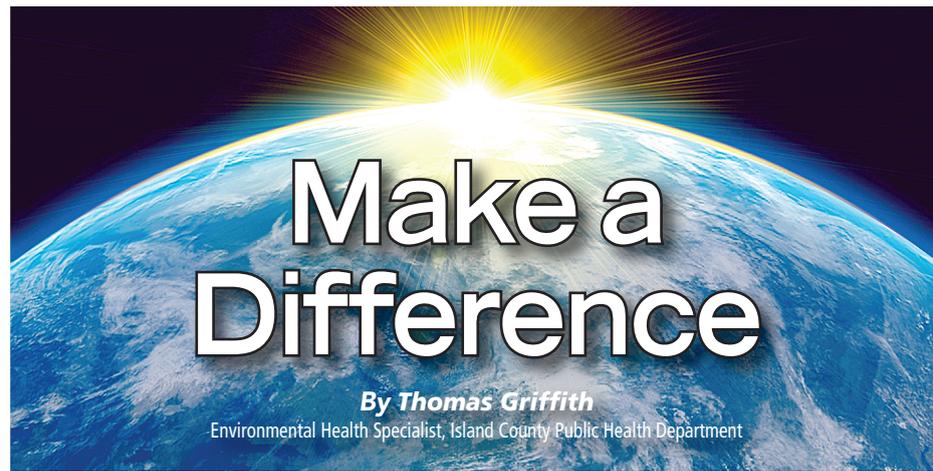


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Make a Difference

By Thomas Griffith

Environmental Health Specialist, Island County Public Health Department

ONSITE SEPTIC SYSTEMS – STAY ON TOP OF WHAT HAPPENS BELOW

From the gorgeous sound and mountain vistas extending in as many directions as one can turn, to the rural-coastal community charm exuded by much of the region, Island County presents a rare and pleasing mosaic of natural and constructed landscapes. One feature not readily observed are the tens of thousands of onsite septic systems (OSSs) which collectively treat millions of gallons of wastewater every year on Whidbey and Camano Islands. When functioning, the septic systems of Island County return treated wastewater to the soil and ultimately our groundwater resources, which are entirely reliant upon rainfall for recharge. When operated in a state of failure, OSSs can negatively affect public, environmental, and commercial interests. As an OSS owner, you have the lower-cost, small-scale equivalent of a sewage treatment plant buried in your backyard, which comes with additional homeowner responsibilities and opportunities to expand your knowledge.

The adage "out of sight, out of mind" simply does not translate to OSS ownership. Failed OSSs have the potential to transport harmful bacteria and viruses to the ground, surface, and marine waters of our region. They also threaten recreational and commercial shellfish harvesting, the ecology of our lakes, streams, and shorelines, and most importantly, the health of the public at large. Properly operating and maintaining your OSS is one of the simplest and easiest actions you can take to protect and promote the health of your environment and community. Here are a few simple ways you can make a difference when it comes to your OSS:

Keep a Lid on it

Cracked, missing, deteriorated, or improperly secured tanks are an easy fix that can literally save a life. Every year, adults, children, and pets are lost to septic tank entrapment – an entirely preventable tragedy. Take the time and expense necessary to properly secure your tank access. Last July, Kenny Ocker of the *Tacoma News Tribune* reported about a 2-year-old in Pierce County, who required resuscitation after falling into an unsecured septic tank. Additional information is available at www.thenewtribune.com/news/local/article215530305.html. If you take no other item for action, please make septic tank lid safety your priority.

Inspect, Detect, Correct

Be proactive about maintaining your septic system. When you buy a home served by OSS, you assume responsibility for its operation and maintenance. Regular inspection and maintenance activities maximize the service life of your OSS and can often catch small issues before they demand large and costly repairs. Few homeowners are aware of the fact state and county health codes require conventional (gravity) system inspection every three years and annual inspection for all other design types.

Timely inspection also benefits you at time of sale. An informed buyer is unlikely to pay top dollar for a home with a neglected OSS and few lenders will finance mortgages with unresolved OSS issues. If you are struggling to recall the date of your last inspection, fear not – Island County's Environmental Health web page has you covered. Our Public Portal, which can be accessed at <https://permits.islandcountywa.gov/SMARTGovPortal/Parcels/ParcelHome>, allows you access to records about the design and service history of your OSS. Do-it-yourself types interested in saving money may be able to obtain certification to inspect specific system types through the Homeowner Septic Training (HOST) 201 program. Visit the Island County Environmental Health web page for details at www.islandcountywa.gov/Health/STWD/Pages/Septic-201.aspx.

Don't Flush Your Money Down the Drain

If you are a first-time OSS owner, you may need to change the way you do your... ahem, business. For starters, only three things should enter your

OSS: human waste, toilet paper, and wastewater. Solids like flushable wipes, garbage disposal waste, cat litter, sanitary napkins, and cigarette butts can block lines and damage system components. Simply putting a strainer on your kitchen sink and removing grease from pots before washing will significantly reduce the introduction of unwanted solids to your tank. Give consideration to all you send down the drain every day. Strong compounds like bleach, ammonia, and drain cleaner can kill the bacteria in your tank and soil. Consider gentle cleaning agents made from vinegar, lemon juice, and baking soda. Remember, too, not all chemicals stay in your system. Some pass through and migrate back to the groundwater supply. If you wouldn't want to drink it, don't flush it. Keeping pollutants out of your septic system today protects our groundwater tomorrow.

Fix Your Fixtures

Leaking faucets might seem to add an inconsequential amount of water to your system, but over time, those drips and drops add up. Broadway aficionados may recall there are five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes in a year, making a few drops per minute add up to hundreds or thousands of gallons of additional annual system loading. A new faucet seat washer costs pennies. A new drainfield on the other hand...

Defend Your Drainfield

Your drainfield is the interface between your OSS and the rest of the world. Soil bacteria provide final treatment to your wastewater as it percolates through the ground, making it safe to re-enter our groundwater. They do so much and ask for so little. The soils of your drainfield can be overwhelmed or clogged with fats/oils, harsh chemicals, excessive flows, and garbage disposal waste. Your soil will eventually lose the ability to accept water and your system will fail.

Encroachment, a common issue in Island County, occurs when a drainfield or system component is adversely impacted by something that has been sited over or around it. Examples of encroachment include driveways, fire pits, deep-rooting plants, and structures like decks and sheds built over drainfields and tanks. Water from gutters may also cause issues if directed onto the drainfield. Saturated soils are hard-pressed to take on more water and may short-circuit sewage to the surface of the ground. Encroachment impacts drainfields in different ways, most of which lead to failure. To my knowledge, "well-maintained drainfield free from encroachment" has never been listed as the cause of drainfield failure.

In Case of Emergency

While a properly maintained system situated in optimal soils can provide decades of wastewater treatment, every system will eventually fail and require partial or complete replacement. Sewage failures are rarely resolved through inaction. The best thing you can do when experiencing signs of failure (slow drains, squishy drainfield, sewage odors) is call a Maintenance Service Provider or the Island County Health Department. We are committed to connecting citizens with the resources necessary to resolve system issues in a manageable time frame and are here to help. If a costly repair is involved, the CRAFT3 Clean Water Loan Program offers several financing options to assist eligible applicants in managing the expense of a repair. Check it out at www.craft3.org/Borrow/clean-water-loans.

The identification and correction of failing septic systems in Island County starts at every home served by onsite septic. In time, our collective efforts will change for the better the places where we live, work, and play.

Thank You, Gene's!



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