

# Septics Edition

First Flush, "tIssue" #7

Spring 2011

## All About Inspections

A septic system needs regular checking and maintenance to avoid costly repairs, just like your car or your house. Washington state onsite septic system regulations (WAC 246-272A) state that septic system owners shall "assure a complete evaluation of the system components to determine functionality, maintenance needs, and compliance with regulations and any permits."

Clallam County Environmental Health commonly refers to these evaluations as septic system maintenance "inspections," involving specific steps depending on the type of system. The purpose of this issue of "Septics Edition" is to describe what Environmental Health considers an adequate inspection. Simply pumping the tank – *while important* – is not adequate unless all system components are professionally evaluated as well.

What *does* a **professional evaluation** consist of? There must be access available to view in order to inspect and maintain the septic tank, pressure tank (if you have one), and drainfield components. Thus a professional inspection may involve first locating and uncovering the various parts of the septic system in addition to the steps below. There are numerous types of systems; we have described inspections for the most common types: conventional and pressurized.

### A. THE TANK

A professional inspector will:

- ✓ Check tank & lids for leaks or groundwater intrusion
- ✓ Check baffles (inlet and outlet)
- ✓ Check and rinse baffle screen
- ✓ Measure scum (lighter layer floating on top)
- ✓ Measure sludge (heavier material settled @ bottom)
- ✓ Check color and odor (the best part!)
- ✓ Look for back-up stains
- ✓ Check pump tank (floats and effluent pump)

If problems are noted or a tank needs pumping, the inspector will tell you. For example, if the scum layer is greater than 6 inches or if the sludge layer is more than 12 inches, it is time to pump the tank (or if the total of scum and sludge is greater than 18 inches). The inspector will also check for biological activity because active bugs and worms in a septic tank are a good thing. Color and odor can indicate a "dead" or inactive tank. Also, staining on the walls could indicate that sewage has backed up into the tank from the drainfield. *Not* a good thing!

For pressurized systems, the inspector will look at the pump tank (receives effluent from the septic tank, before the drainfield) to make sure floats and effluent pumps are

operating correctly and that there are no solids in the tank. They will also check the electrical control panels to make sure that pump settings are correct and that wires, alarms, and switches are working.

### B. THE DRAINFIELD

- ✓ Look for mushy spots
- ✓ Check drainfield monitoring ports

For Conventional Gravity Systems, a professional inspector will also:

- ✓ Check if distribution box (D-box) is level
- ✓ Check D-box for solids and equal flow into drain lines

For Pressurized Systems, a professional inspector will also:

- ✓ Flush drainfield pipes (if needed)
- ✓ Check pump tank floats and pumps
- ✓ Check electrical controls and alarms
- ✓ Check for plugged holes ("pressure test")

Depending on the type of drainfield you have, this part of the inspection could take some time. Inspectors will walk over the drainfield area and may dig a hole alongside a drainfield trench to determine if there is pooling sewage or black goeey drain rock (called a "bio-mat"). This would indicate a failing septic system. If any problems are noted, the inspector will recommend solutions.

These are **examples** of what a professional inspection may consist of, depending on the type of system. When the inspection is complete, the inspector will file a "System Status Inspection Form" with Environmental Health. State regulations also require the County to track inspections for each system in the County. Depending on the type of system, inspections may be required every year or every three years.

Always hire a licensed professional if you experience problems with your septic system. Clallam County updates the list of local professionals yearly at the second webpage listed below.



A licensed professional rinsing the baffle screen from a septic tank in Forks.

### Clallam County Onsite Program Websites

Onsite septic systems in general:	<a href="http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite.html">http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite.html</a>
Lists of OSS professionals in Clallam Co.:	<a href="http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_professionals.html">http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_professionals.html</a>
"Septics 101" class information:	<a href="http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_septic101.html">http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_septic101.html</a>
Past "Septics Edition" newsletters:	<a href="http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/ehnewsletter1.html">http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/ehnewsletter1.html</a>



## The Water Column

Ever tried fresh clams or mussels steamed with garlic and butter? Fresh shellfish doesn't get much better than that, and collecting your own for dinner is one of the very special privileges of living in Clallam County. With so many awesome beaches, how does one choose where and when to go? Get these answers to avoid getting a ticket, getting sick... or worse! Here's the scoop:

(1) Know the RULES: Buy a shellfish license from Dept. of Fish and Wildlife and check their regulations for seasons, size limits, and harvest limits. The website also has helpful maps of most public beaches. [http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/shellfish\\_seaweed\\_rules.html](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/shellfish_seaweed_rules.html)

(2) Know the CLOSURES: Closures may be **indefinite** due to chronic **pollution** from land and other sources, or **emergencies** to protect public health from illness or death due to **biotoxins** such as "red tide" (PSP), *Vibrio* bacteria, or a **sewage** spill. This is why WA Dept. of Health (DOH) maintains a 24-hour **Shellfish Safety Hotline 1-800-562-5632** with recorded information on closures. DOH also provides extensive information about shellfish harvesting at its website (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/recshell.htm>), such as:

- [Clickable maps](#) show recreational beaches closed to harvest; and
- The [Shellfish Safety Bulletin](#) is an online text version of recreational closures, listed by county.

Closure information is updated on the DOH website and hotline whenever changes occur – which can be very sudden. Posted signs tend to get vandalized, so don't rely on them. The only way to be safe is to "**know before you dig.**"

(3) Know the SPECIES: You may see closures listed for specific species, while others in that area are safe to harvest. Here's why:

- Mussels accumulate biotoxins more quickly than other types of shellfish
- Varnish clams tend to have higher toxin levels
- Butter clams and varnish clams can remain toxic long after other species return to safe levels

For example, [as of this writing](#) Sequim Bay is closed for the harvest of **butter clams** because of marine biotoxin but open for other species. Whereas Dungeness Bay is closed year-round to **all** species due to bacterial pollution **in some areas** (for example, Dungeness Landing County Park), but only in winter in other areas (west side of Cline Spit). On the other hand, if a red-tide warning is in effect, the **entire** Bay could be closed.

(4) Know the TIDES: [http://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/tide\\_predictions.shtml](http://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/tide_predictions.shtml)

(5) Know the PROTOCOL: Fill your holes. Pack out your trash. Follow safe handling practices (because cooking doesn't always render shellfish safe), found at: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/Pubs/recharvest.pdf>

*And protect water quality so future generations can also enjoy fresh local shellfish!*

<p>The Clean Water Herald is a periodic newsletter sponsored by members of the Clean Water Work Group, to inform and promote good stewardship of our shared natural resources.</p>	
<h1>SPRING CALENDAR</h1>	
<p>The "<b>Septics Edition</b>" series will be published quarterly through 2011 by the friendly staff at Environmental Health Services, a division of the Clallam County Health &amp; Human Services Department.</p> <p>Contact us at the courthouse, 360-417-2258, or visit <a href="http://www.clallam.net/envhealth">www.clallam.net/envhealth</a>.</p> <p>Major funding for the <b>Septics Edition</b> is provided by the Centennial Clean Water Fund through a grant from Washington Department of Ecology.</p> <p>Printed on 30% post-consumer content recycled paper.</p>	<p><b>Septics 101</b> <i>Online</i></p> <p>A 30-minute video and quiz are now available, through the link below. When you've completed the course and quiz, print and save your Certificate of Completion.</p> <p><i>There are no in-person Septics 101 classes scheduled at this time.</i></p> <p><b>Take Septics 101 online at</b> <a href="http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_septic101.html">http://www.clallam.net/HHS/EnvironmentalHealth/onsite_septic101.html</a></p>
	<p><b>Septics 201</b> <i>Planned release in late 2011</i></p> <p>Also known as <b>Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Inspection Training</b>. This class will, pending pilot test results, train the homeowner how to perform a certified inspection of their septic system.</p>

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*The address used is the taxing address on record in the Clallam County Assessor's Office for one or more properties that are (or are likely, according to land use information) utilizing an onsite septic system.*