

Proper maintenance key for septic systems

The following guest commentary was submitted by Jennifer DeMoss, communications director with Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

There are over 1 million septic systems in Michigan. They're an integral part of managing Michiganders' waste — municipal sewer lines aren't universally available, and septic systems work well if they are properly maintained. However, an improperly maintained septic system can pollute Northern Michigan waterways with human waste and affect public health. *E. coli*, other bacteria, and viruses can leach into waterbodies if a septic system fails. That's why the Watershed Council advocates for a statewide septic law that mandates uniform standards for how on-site septic systems are maintained.

Watershed Policy Director Grenetta Thomassey has been leading the Watershed

Council's efforts for a state-wide septic law.

"I guess that since septic systems are underground and out of sight, it is easy to forget about them. If we can flush and go without problems, great. But, sometimes problems are missed, and those can lead to failure," said Thomassey.

She believes that reliance on a system that is built to last for 25 to 30 years and is often only visible during a failure lulls people into a false sense of security.

"We have no issue with the way new septic systems are handled by local governments and health departments. Our problem is that once they're installed, there's no requirement to ever look at them again. What other major appliance can you use for 30 years without ever maintaining it?"

Septic systems for individual family use are currently regulated by regional health departments. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan handles septic

system permit applications for Antrim, Emmet, Otsego, and Charlevoix counties. They offer services in siting new systems and evaluating existing ones. The Health Department recommends that owners pump their systems on a regular basis, which the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) suggests should be every two to three years.

A Michigan State University study shows that regular maintenance is not occurring in all households. MSU professor Joan Rose and her research team sampled Michigan river systems and found that the more septic systems were located near sampling sites, the more markers of human fecal contamination were found in the water. Rose noted that EGLE estimated that there are 130,000 failing septic systems in use in Michigan, none of which have maintenance requirements at the state level.

This doesn't mean that septic systems are a bad

alternative to municipal sewer systems. Jeff Alexander from Bridge Michigan reported that municipal sewage systems contribute more to water pollution from untreated sewage than septic systems. However, as Thomassey points out, policy changes could protect water quality by requiring regular maintenance and upkeep.

In previous years, there have been discussions in Lansing on statewide legislation requiring septic system inspections. However, these were unsuccessful. For now, COVID-19 has interrupted this effort, but the Watershed Council is hopeful for possible future consideration in the legislature. There are several possibilities: inspection at the time a property is sold, mandatory pumping at regular intervals, or mandatory inspections at regular intervals. If a state law is ruled out, Thomassey remarked that local governments, in coordination with local health departments, could pass ordinances re-

quiring inspections. About 11 Michigan counties and townships require septic system inspections when a property is sold.

To maintain the health of your septic system, make sure that only water and human waste enter the septic system. Avoid using garbage disposals and ensure that trash doesn't end up down the drain or in the toilet. Solvents, pesticides, and other chemicals never belong in a septic system. Make sure you know the location of your drainfield and avoid parking on it. If you have any problems with your septic system, call the Health Department of Northwest Michigan at (231) 547-6523 for guidance on finding the right professional.

For more information on septic legislation, visit our website at <https://www.watershedcouncil.org/septic-question.html> or contact Grenetta Thomassey at (231) 347-1181, or info@watershedcouncil.org.

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