

Questions & Answers

SepticSmart Program



Problem

Q. What does a septic system have to do with clean water?

A. Essentially, your septic system acts as a mini wastewater treatment plant operating in your backyard. It receives all of the household waste you put down a sink, flush down a toilet, or run through your washing machine. That waste, as you might imagine, includes a number of things that we don't want to have in our water. It can pollute groundwater beneath your home if it does not receive adequate treatment by your wastewater system. Some of this groundwater makes its way into our surface waters, and some even ends up in household wells. For further information, please visit www.SepticSmart.org

Q. How could my system be part of the problem?

A. If you are operating an unapproved septic system, or even an approved one that is failing, you could inadvertently be contributing to contamination of groundwater and surface water. To find out about your system, go online at www.SepticSmart.org/check and check our database to determine your system's status. If your system is not listed, you can contact the Water Quality Program staff at 303-441-1564 to assist you. Our staff will search the existing files and provide guidance on next steps.

Q. What's my role in fixing the problem?

A. The first step is for you to check that your system is approved and is functioning properly. If it isn't, you'll need to get the appropriate permit to make any repairs or to install a new system. After you receive the appropriate permit, you would have the repairs done, and then get final approval from Boulder County Public Health (BCPH) to make sure everything was installed or repaired properly. Lastly, make sure to properly maintain your system to get a long life out of it.

Permitting and Approval

Q. Is the permitting process complex?

A. The permitting process is fairly simple. It requires soil and site evaluations to be conducted by both a registered professional engineer (RPE) and BCPH. The process is outlined on our website at www.SepticSmart.org/permit. We are also happy to help you in person at our office at 3450 Broadway in Boulder, or by phone at 303-441-1564. In most cases, it takes about 10-14 days to complete the permitting process; however, during the busy building season or inclement weather conditions when it is more difficult to get to properties, it may take a little longer.

Q. I already have a permit for my system. Does that mean it's approved?

A. Getting a permit alone does not ensure that your system was properly installed and meets all required regulations. Therefore, in order to ensure that the system was installed properly, a BCPH environmental health specialist will check and verify that your system was installed according to regulations before issuing final approval. Upon approval, BCPH will

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issue a Certificate of Final Approval for the system. You can check to see if your system has received final approval by going to www.SepticSmart.org/check.

Q. If I'm not selling or buying a house, do I have to get my system approved?

A. In order to minimize contamination of our groundwater, current regulations require that all properties not served by a municipal or district sanitation facility must be able to verify that sewage is being disposed of in a sanitary manner. A permit and final approval are required to construct, alter, or repair any system. A permit is NOT required to replace a septic tank lid or to perform maintenance on a septic system, such as pumping the tank, maintenance on effluent filters or aerobic systems, or unclogging a sewer line. You can apply for a permit at Boulder County Public Health, located at 3450 Broadway in Boulder.

Q. How much will a permit cost me?

A. The cost of a permit ranges from \$200 to \$730; the amount depends on the type of system needed. Permit fees may be reduced for low-income households on a sliding scale basis. Please call our office at 303-441-1564 to discuss your situation.

Q. How much should I expect to spend for a general septic system repair or installation?

A. Costs for system repairs or new systems vary depending on how difficult it is to gain access to the site, whether soil needs to be brought in to the site, the type of system to be constructed, etc. Septic system repairs in Boulder County may cost between \$2,100 to \$3,900 for a minor repair and \$4,800 to \$22,000+ for a major repair. New system installation costs in Boulder County range from \$7,700 to \$35,000. For more details about the range of costs, including costs for hiring an engineer, please go to www.SepticSmart.org/resources.

Q. What if I can't afford it right now?

A. We understand that updating your system may be an unexpected expense. So to help, we will offer a sliding scale for permit fees based on your situation. Income-qualified Boulder County homeowners can also apply for low-interest loans through the Colorado Division of Housing/Longs Peak Energy Conservation Housing Rehab. Visit www.co.boulder.co.us/ho/weatherization to find out more. Other options include second mortgages and home equity lines of credit. Reverse mortgages are another option for individuals over 62 years of age.

Certified Inspection

Q. Am I required to have my system inspected and approved?

A. In order to protect our watershed, all systems must be approved. We recognize that not every system is currently approved, and that we must find a way to bring every septic system up to current standards. We are looking at different strategies to address all of the septic systems in the county now and into the future.

One potential solution is the development of a "property transfer" regulation, which would require that the system be inspected and approved before the property is transferred or sold to a new owner to ensure it is functioning properly. The regulation would help to ensure that our water is protected and that new homeowners aren't inheriting problem systems.

It is being proposed that if you are selling a house, you will need to hire a certified inspector, have the system pumped and inspected, and apply for a property transfer permit. If the

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property passes inspection, you would receive a permit and a certificate of operation. If the property does not pass inspection, a repair permit would be required to correct the problems, either before the sale is completed or within a defined period following sale of the property.

That way, if you are buying a house, you would be assured that there is an approved onsite wastewater system (i.e. septic system) permit for the house, and that the system met inspection criteria at the time of inspection; or you would include resolution as part of the sale negotiation.

Q. When will I have to do something?

- A. We have proposed several strategies to ensure that septic systems are approved and updated as needed. BCPH is in the process of gathering public input on the strategies and listening to other ideas community members have about addressing septic systems throughout our county. BCPH's public engagement process will include community open houses, community meetings with our Board of Health, press releases, direct mailings, posters, flyers, and opportunities to provide online feedback. For more information about event locations and dates, please visit www.SepticSmart.org.

Q. How do I go about getting my system inspected?

- A. You will need to hire a trained and certified independent inspector to inspect your system. BCPH has put together a list of certified inspectors for your convenience at www.SepticSmart.org/resources.

Q. How much does an inspection cost?

- A. Inspector's rates vary, but the cost for pumping a septic tank is about \$200 and around \$250 for the inspection. Costs will also vary depending upon your location and ease of access to your site. Contact a certified inspector for exact pricing.

Q. I have more questions. Where can I get more information?

- A. We have designed our website to be a central location for nearly all of the information you might need, including the ability to ask a question online, look up your address to see if your system is already approved, find a wastewater system professional, and much more. The address is www.SepticSmart.org. If you prefer, you can call us at 303 441-1564, or visit us in person at 3450 Broadway in Boulder.

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