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What to Do When Your Onsite Wastewater Treatment System (Septic System) Experiences Flooding

Natural disasters such as flooding—or even prolonged heavy rain—can disrupt the proper functioning of an onsite wastewater treatment system, commonly known as a septic system.

A typical septic system includes two main components:

- **The septic tank**, where solids settle.
- **The soil treatment area** (also called the leach field or drain field), where effluent is dispersed and treated in the soil.

Flooding may impact either or both of these components.

Tip: If you are unsure where your septic system is located, contact your **local county public health or environmental health department** for assistance.

Tips for Managing a Flooded Septic System

1. Let the System Dry Out

- Use as little water as possible until the system recovers.
- **Do not** allow wastewater into the system during this period.
 - Avoid bathing, laundry, toilet flushing, and other water uses.
 - Do not pour flood-cleanup water (especially with disinfectants) down the drain—chemicals may kill beneficial bacteria in the septic system.
- Redirect roof gutters and sump pump discharge away from the septic system. (Note: This is also a good idea in “normal” times.)
- **Mark the location** of your tank and drain field to avoid walking or driving over them, which could compact the soil or cause damage.
- Take extra care when removing debris near septic components to avoid impact to or compaction of the system.

2. Seek Professional Assistance

- **Turn off electricity** to any pumps, aeration units, or treatment components.
- Have a licensed **electrician or trained septic installer** inspect electrical components for damage before restoring power.
- Have the **septic and pump tanks professionally pumped and inspected**. (See note below about patience for timing of pumping.):
 - Floodwater may have introduced silt, debris, or contaminants.
 - Check for clogs or damage to inlet/outlet tees and baffles caused by grease or debris.



3. Be Patient

- **Do not pump tanks** until groundwater levels have subsided.
 - Empty tanks are at risk of **floating** out of the ground or **shifting** due to buoyancy.
 - Pumping tanks during high groundwater conditions may cause them to **collapse** or **rupture** due to external pressure.
 - If groundwater is partway up the side of the tank, a **partial pump** may be feasible.
 - Water from the soil treatment area may **backflow into the tank**, necessitating multiple pumping events.
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Inspect for Damage

After flooding, visually assess or have a professional inspect the following:

- Piping connections entering the home or structure.
- Soil erosion or washout around septic components.
- Disturbance or damage to the drain field.
- Broken or dislodged access lids/risers.
 - Any open tank access should be **flagged and cordoned off** to prevent accidental entry.
- Electrical system components (e.g., control panels, junction boxes).

Warning: Flooding can cause parts of the system to become dislodged, damaged, or non-functional. If your system is **backing up or malfunctioning**, **stop use immediately** and contact your **county public health or environmental health department** for guidance on repairs and restoration.

Additional Resources

- U.S. EPA - Septic Systems - What to Do after the Flood: <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/septic-systems-what-do-after-flood>
- SepticSmart Homeowner Resources: www.epa.gov/septic

<https://cdphe.colorado.gov/OWTS>