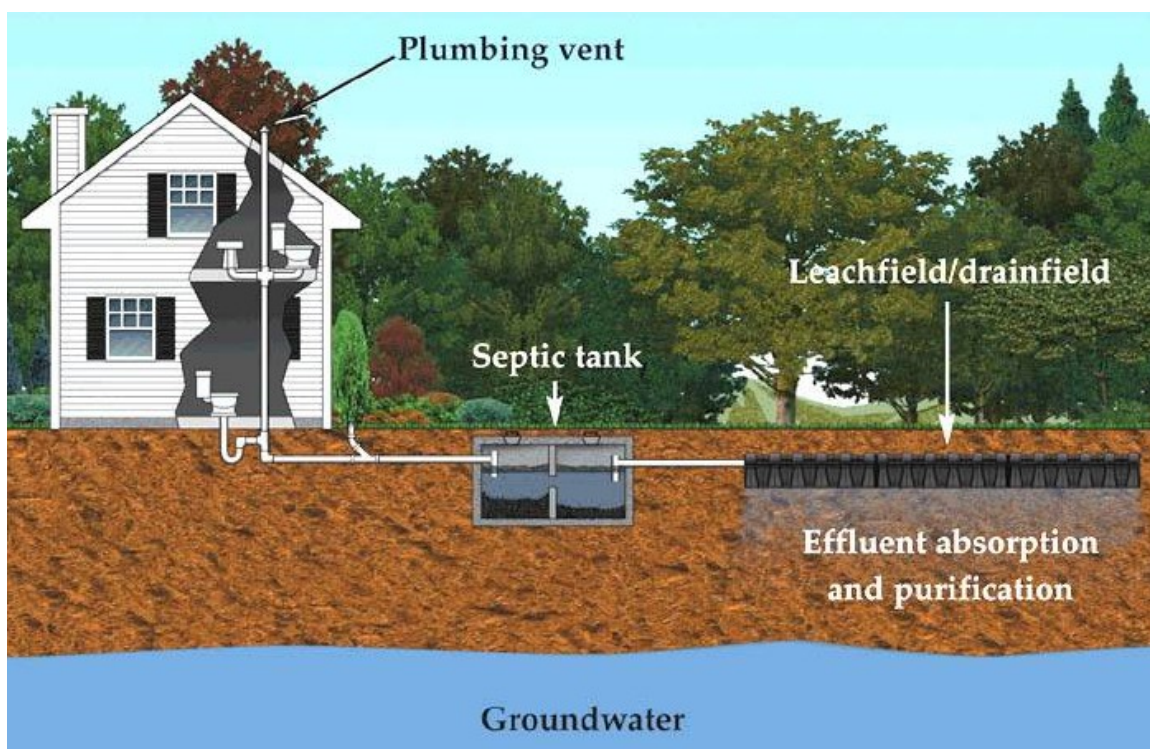


Septic Systems 101

An Arizona HOMEOWNER'S MANUAL

How Your Septic System Works,
How to Care For & Maintain It,
Extend Its Useful Life,
And Save You Money!



As a community service,
your Homeowner's Manual was developed by the

**Arizona Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association
(AZOWRA)**

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Space Reserved for Other County Supporting Sponsors

INTRODUCTION

Most of you are conscientious about the care and maintenance of your vehicles. Oil and filter changes plus other periodic inspections help protect your investment.

Similarly, a septic system represents a significant part of the investment in a property. **THIS SYSTEM MAY BE YOUR MOST OVERLOOKED AND UNDERVALUED UTILITY.**

A properly designed, installed and maintained septic system (onsite wastewater treatment system) can be expected to provide many years of service. However, lack of proper care and maintenance, and/or abuse of the system, can result in problems or premature failure. Repairs can be expensive...and replacement could cost as much as a new automobile.

BE AWARE: A malfunctioning (or inadequate) septic system can negatively affect your property's value and could pose legal liability consequences.

Become familiar with and follow recommendations in your Homeowner's Manual...in particular, the "Do Not Flush" and "Do's and Don'ts" Sections.

THE CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY . . . IT'S ALSO THE LAW. At stake are your economic best interests, your family's health as well as protection of our groundwater and the environment.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF A SEPTIC SYSTEM

A septic system is an onsite sewage treatment and disposal facility. It consists of three main parts: the septic tank, the drainfield and the soil under and around the drainfield. A septic system should effectively accept and treat liquid wastes from your home. Its ultimate purpose is to prevent contaminants from entering the groundwater and nearby wells, lakes and streams.

In Arizona, an estimated 570,000 onsite waste disposal systems of various types are in use. Approximately one of every five households is served by one of these systems.

Savvy homeowners understand that system problems are cheaper and easier to prevent than they are to correct. They are also aware that a well maintained system can enhance the value and enjoyment of their property.

SYSTEM RECORDS: Your property record file should include copies of your system's permitting documents and plot plan. These documents will be a valuable reference to help you better understand the components and location of your system. They will also save time for the service provider or inspector of your system. If you should sell your property, permitting documents are usually requested, by contract, to be delivered to the new owner.

RECOMMENDATION: If you do not already have system records in your possession, contact your local Environmental or Health Agency and request copies of all available documents, usually filed by your Tax Parcel Number (APN) or your property address.

1.0 TYPES OF SYSTEMS DEFINED

ONSITE WASTEWATER TREATMENT SYSTEM: This term includes conventional septic tank systems as well as alternative systems. Both types of systems are often referred to as an “onsite system” or “septic system.”

CONVENTIONAL SEPTIC TANK SYSTEM: The most common type of system. It consists of a septic tank where partial treatment of wastewater takes place, then releases the effluent by gravity to the drainfield for final treatment and disposal. Installing a new conventional septic system can cost \$4,000 or more.

ALTERNATIVE (or Alternate) SYSTEM: These are advanced technology treatment systems that are required when site/soil conditions prevent the use of a conventional septic tank system. These systems typically have special maintenance requirements and a “system specific” operating manual. There are 20 different types of alternative systems approved for use in Arizona. Most of these systems incorporate the use of a septic tank. A new alternative system may cost from \$10,000 to \$20,000 or more.

ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS APPROVED FOR USE UNDER ARIZONA CODE:

- Composting Toilet
- Pressure Distribution System
- Gravelless Trench
- Natural Seal Evapotranspiration Bed
- Lined Evapotranspiration Bed
- Wisconsin Mound
- Engineered Pad System (e.g. Eljen™)
- Intermittent Sand Filter
- Peat Filter
- Textile Filter
- Denitrifying System
- Sewage Vault
- Aerobic System
- Nitrate-Reactive Media Filter
- Cap System
- Constructed Wetland
- Sand-Lined Trench
- Disinfection Devices
- Surface Disposal (e.g. Bubblers, etc.)
- Subsurface Drip Irrigation Disposal

2.0 BASIC SEPTIC SYSTEM TERMS

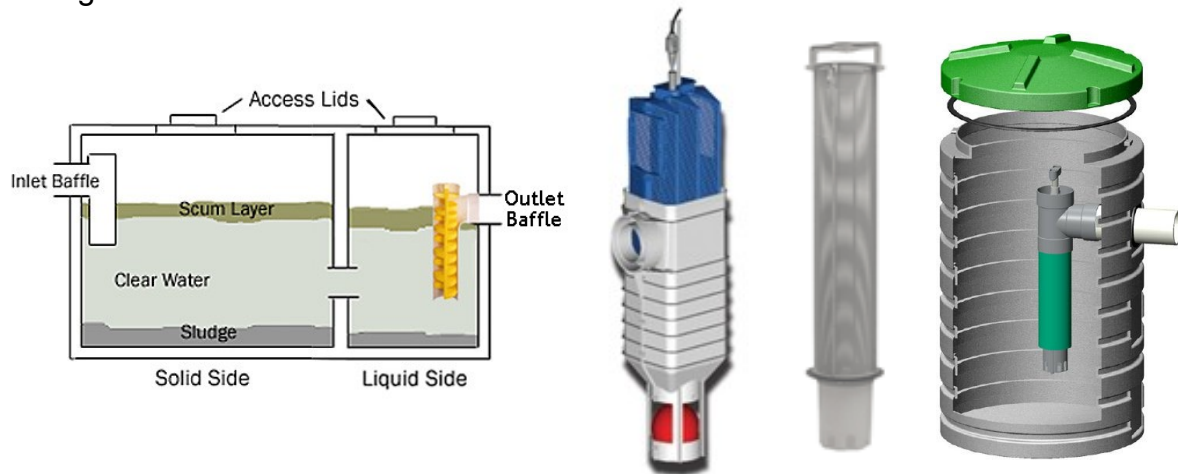
BIOMAT: A layer of organic material that forms in the upper few inches of soil under the drainfield. This biomat zone helps remove many of the germs and chemical pollutants. However, failure to pump out solids in the septic tank on a timely basis can result in a clogged biomat. When that happens, effluent is prevented from flowing out of the drainfield, creating a failed system.

DISTRIBUTION: A means of distributing effluent from septic tank to multiple lines in the drainfield. This distribution can occur through a D-Box, D-valve, serial loading, or pressure distribution.

DRAINFIELD (Disposal Works or Leachfield): Common terms referring to that part of the system where final treatment and disposal takes place.

EFFLUENT: Partially treated wastewater; flows from tank to the drainfield.

EFFLUENT FILTER (SCREEN): A special filter installed in the outlet tee of septic tank, designed to protect the drainfield by removing suspended solids which could clog the biomat.



INLET BAFFLE/TEE: Slows incoming waste to reduce turbulence of the liquid in the septic tank, and aids separation of scum and sludge layers.

MANHOLE: (Access Lid) Large removable cover(s) at top of septic tank for pumping access and inspection purposes.

OUTLET BAFFLE/TEE: Reduces suspended solids from flowing out with the liquids. (If installed, an effluent filter enhances this important function.)

PUMP TANK / EFFLUENT PUMP: When a system's drainfield is higher in elevation than the septic tank, an effluent pump chamber and pump is required to raise the effluent to the elevation of the drainfield.

RESERVE AREA: Refers to an area on your property designated as suitable for a new drainfield system when your current drainfield fails. A reserve area is required in Arizona for all new systems. **BE AWARE:** Many older systems may not have been designed with a reserve area identified.

RISERS: These are watertight, tube-like extensions installed on top of a septic tank to permit easier access to the manhole(s) and/or access ports. Risers are required for new systems if the tank lids are more than 6" below finished grade. They can also be retrofitted to older systems - **highly recommended**. Risers save time (and \$\$) for inspections and pumping. They can also minimize disruption to your landscaping.



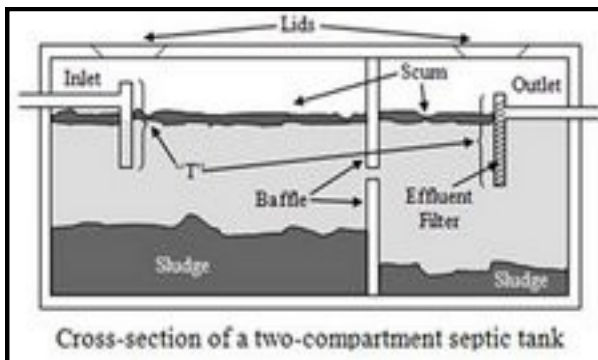
3.0 SEPTIC TANK

The septic tank provides the first step in treatment using natural processes to partially treat the wastewater. Its primary purpose is to protect the drainfield and the receiving soil from being clogged by suspended solids in the effluent.

The wastewater discharged from the home flows into the tank where heavier solids settle to the bottom to form a **sludge** layer. Lighter materials such as soaps, fats, grease, etc., float to the top forming a **scum** layer.

Micro organisms (naturally occurring bacteria in the waste stream) digest or break down the waste solids helping to reduce the volume of sludge and scum. **This biological process usually reduces only about 40% of the sludge and scum.**

The tank must be pumped regularly to remove the accumulated solids. This will prevent them from being washed out into the drainfield where they can clog the soil and create potential system failure.



A septic tank is a large watertight container buried in the ground outside of the home. It provides the primary level of wastewater treatment. Tanks are usually constructed of concrete, fiberglass, polyethylene or plastic. Tank size (in gallons) will vary depending on the system's design requirements.

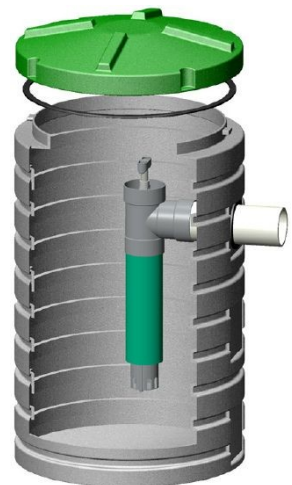
NOTE: Older septic tanks, installed before 1990, were typically one compartment. A **two compartment tank** (as illustrated above), processes wastewater more efficiently. Two compartment tanks are now required to be used in Arizona.

4.0 SEPTIC TANK EFFLUENT FILTER

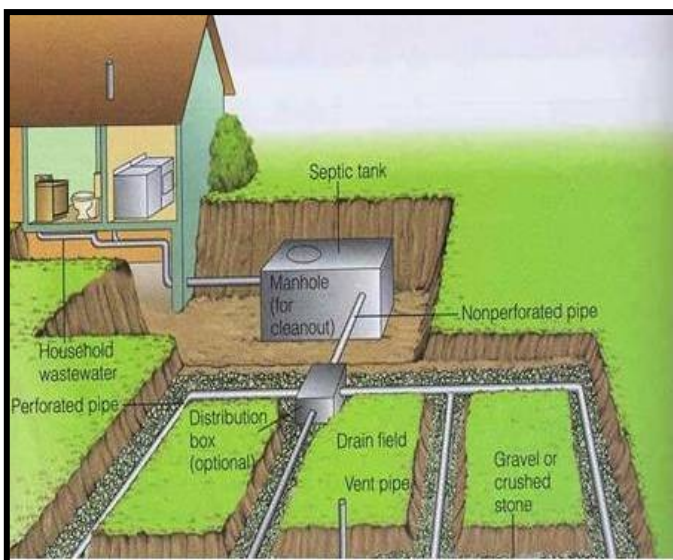
An effluent filter prevents excessive solids from entering a system's final treatment process. A filter can be installed in the septic tank at the outlet or in a water-tight container just after the tank. Filters are now required for all new installations. A filter can also be added to an older existing system either in the tank or externally.

NOTE: If your septic tank has an effluent filter it will need to be serviced at least each time the tank is pumped; usually more often depending on usage and overall maintenance of the system.

BE AWARE: Cleaning the filter could be performed by a homeowner with some basic instructions. However, many people consider this task to be messy and unpleasant. Also, there are safety issues to consider such as toxic gases and exposure to germs in the sewage. Many homeowners rely on their septic pumper to clean the filter as part of routine system inspections.



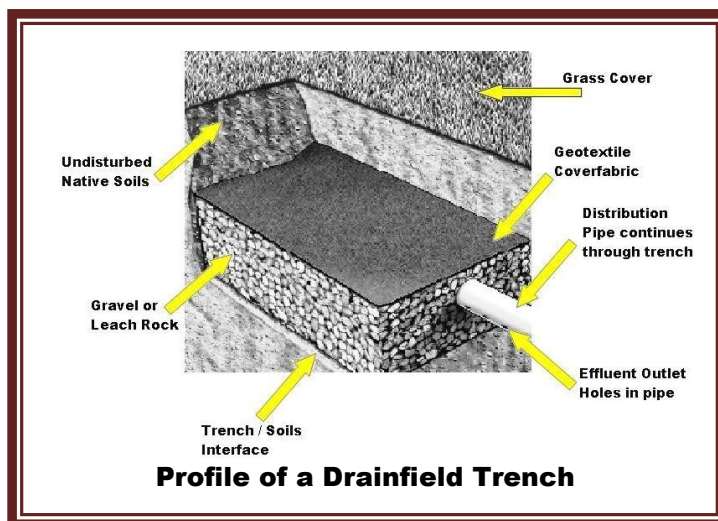
5.0 THE DRAINFIELD



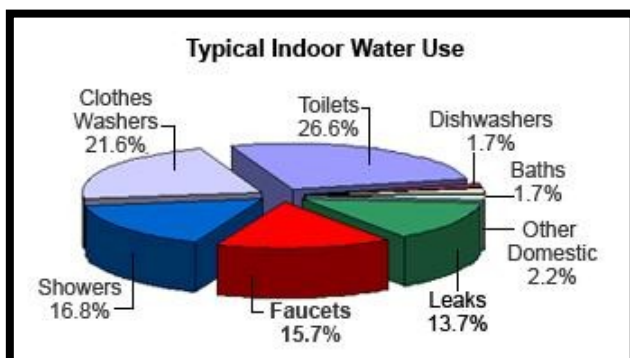
A septic system's drainfield ("disposal works" or "leachfield") delivers the sewage effluent to the soil for final treatment and disposal. The drainfield can be configured in a bed, rock and pipe trench(es) or chamber trench(es). The effluent flows by gravity out of the tank through the outlet baffle/tee (or filter, if installed), into perforated pipe in the drainfield trenches. The effluent passes through holes in the pipe, then trickles through gravel (or other media) to the soil. The soil acts as a biological filter to remove nearly all harmful substances

including disease-causing bacteria, viruses and toxic organic materials. A drainfield can consist of a single trench or multiple trenches, as illustrated, depending upon design requirements.

If the drainfield is overloaded with too much effluent in a short period of time (e.g. running consecutive loads of laundry, draining a garden bathtub, etc), it can cause sewage to ooze up to the ground surface or it can result in backups in the home. Not only is this an unpleasant condition, it is also a health hazard.



Water conservation is critical to the operation of your septic system to help reduce risk of failure (see water use chart below). Consider the following tips:



- ◆ Replace older toilets & clothes washers with high efficiency models. Investigate possible rebate/incentive programs;
- ◆ Install faucet aerators & shower head restrictors to further reduce water use;
- ◆ Use common sense water conserving practices (e.g. limit shower & bath time, minimize water use when brushing teeth or shaving, & operate clothes washer only for a full load); and
- ◆ Closely monitor and repair leaky toilets and faucets.

6.0 TANK PUMPING & INSPECTIONS

What Does An Inspection Include?

- Locate septic tank & system.
- Uncover & inspect manhole covers.
- Check level of tank contents.
- Measure scum & sludge layers.
- Check Inlet & Outlet Tees.
- Check water flow into tank.
- Water test drainfield.
- Check for leaks & roots.
- Inspect filter & mechanical components.
- Pump tank if necessary

“Out of sight, out of mind . . . as long as the toilets flush and drains drain, everything’s O.K.” Some homeowners assume that their onsite system will work forever without maintenance. They often wait until the system has problems before having the system inspected and the tank pumped- not a good decision.

NOTE: If you own an alternative system with mechanical and electrical components, **at least an annual inspection is recommended.** Most homeowners using one of these more complex systems establish maintenance contracts with specialists to help ensure that the system continues to operate as intended.

INSTALLING A NEW ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM: The permit for most types of alternative systems requires the owner to obtain a maintenance contract with a service provider for at least one year.

As emphasized in other parts of this manual, periodic inspections and having the tank pumped, when necessary, are critical to the system’s proper operation. The table below offers further guidance:

Tank Size (GAL)	Number of People Living in House							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
750	9.1	4.2	2.6	1.8	1.3	1	0.7	0.6
1000	12.4	5.9	3.7	2.6	2	1.5	1.2	1
1250	15.6	7.5	4.8	3.4	2.6	2	1.7	1.4
1500	18.9	9.1	5.9	4.2	3.3	2.6	2.1	1.8
1750	22.1	10.7	6.9	5	3.9	3.1	2.6	2.2
2000	25.4	12.4	8	5.9	4.5	3.7	3.1	2.6
2500	31.9	15.6	10.2	7.5	5.9	4.8	4	4

Pumping Frequency in Years OSU Extension AEX-740-98

The Pumping Frequency Chart above is intended for homes without a garbage disposal. If one is being used the tank may need to be pumped more frequently .

7.0 SEPTIC TANK ADDITIVES

The use of certain commercial septic tank additives (biological/enzyme/chemical) are advertised as important to stimulate bacterial action and keep septic systems healthy. Some products infer that you won’t have to pump the tank as often and they will increase the life of your drainfield. Many onsite industry authorities are skeptical. Some additives are considered to be harmful.

CONSENSUS: Additives will not eliminate the need for timely pumping of the septic tank.

8.0 DO NOT FLUSH ...

The First Line of Defense to Protect your Septic System



DO NOT FLUSH

Coffee Grounds
Dental Floss
Disposable Diapers
Baby Wipes / Facial Tissues
Sanitary Napkins / Tampons



Condoms
Cigarette Butts
Fats, Grease or Oil

Chemicals such as:
Paints



Varnishes

Thinners / Solvents

Anti-Freeze

Photographic Solutions

Pesticides / Herbicides



Prescription Drugs &
Over-the-Counter
Medicines*

BE AWARE: Flushing certain unused medicines down the toilet can cause the natural bacteria in the septic tank to become “sick” or even die. This can disrupt the primary treatment process and waste will not break down as it should. This can negatively affect the system’s performance. **REMINDER:** Other than normal toilet waste, flush only toilet paper.

WHAT TO DO WITH UNUSED MEDICINES?

Check with your law enforcement or other local organizations who may have a program for the public to properly dispose of these medications. The main goals are to help keep these meds out of the hands of children, avoid potential groundwater pollution, and maximize biological function of the septic system. Federal guidelines and options for proper drug disposal are available at: www.WhiteHouseDrugPolicy.gov

OTHER CAUTIONS: Recent studies indicate that some household cleaning products may not be compatible with the bacteria in the septic tank. These items include caustic drain cleaners, laundry detergents with high levels of bleach, anti-bacterial soaps and bathroom products such as toilet cleaners and scum-removing shower sprays.

RECOMMENDATION: Read labels and use such products sparingly. Consider “green” cleaning products such as baking soda, white vinegar and lemon juice.

9.0 SEPTIC SYSTEM DO's & DON'Ts

- ◆ **DO** maintain a file of permits and other system documents including Operation & Maintenance information. Keep records of all inspections, pumping & repairs.
- ◆ **DO** have your system inspected & the tank pumped every 3-5 years, depending on its size, use & number of residents. An alternative system with mechanical or electrical components should be inspected at least annually.
- ◆ **DO** call a licensed professional, when needed, if you experience problems or observe indication of system failures.
- ◆ **DO** learn and mark the location of your septic tank, drainfield & other system components. Draw a sketch of the system.
- ◆ **DO** divert other sources of water away from the area of the system; e.g. surface water, downspouts, French drains & sump pump.
- ◆ **DO** conserve water to avoid overloading the system. Repair any leaky faucets or toilets. Use modern water saver fixtures.
- ◆ **DO** limit the use of a garbage disposal ... or don't use one. More frequent pumping is necessary when using a disposal. Compost and use the trash can instead..
- ◆ **DO** be skeptical about using septic tank additives. They have not been proven to eliminate or reduce regular septic tank pumping.
- ◆ **DO** be cautious about allowing water softener backwash to enter your septic tank. Check your Owner's Manual.
- ◆ **DON'T** use your toilet as a trash can for non-biodegradable material. Other than normal toilet waste, flush only plain toilet paper. OBSERVE THE OTHER "DO NOT FLUSH" CAUTIONS.
- ◆ **DON'T** use excessive amounts of anti-bacterial soaps, commercial bathroom cleaners or laundry detergents with high levels of bleach. Consider using "green" cleaning products such as baking soda, white vinegar, ammonia, lemon juice or cream of tartar.
- ◆ **DON'T** run successive loads of laundry. Overloading your septic tank in a short period of time does not allow it to function properly.
- ◆ **DON'T** drain a hot tub into your septic tank. Instead, drain cooled hot tub water onto areas away from the septic tank & drainfield.
- ◆ **DON'T** construct any buildings, home additions or any hard surfaced area over the septic tank, drainfield or the reserve area.
- ◆ **DON'T** plant trees/vegetation (except grass) over or near the tank or drainfield. Roots can cause clogging & back-ups.
- ◆ **DON'T** allow anyone to drive over or park on any part of the septic tank or drainfield. Compacted soil inhibits proper treatment.
- ◆ **DON'T** ignore: UNSECURED COVERS on risers or tank covers above ground level (small children could fall in); POOLING WATER/ SOGGY SOIL in area of septic tank or drainfield; TOILETS OR SINK BACK-UPS when you flush or do laundry; GREEN GRASS/WEEDS growing over the drainfield.

REMINDER: Suggest you review this care & maintenance information with family members as well as with guests and/or renters, as applicable.

10.0 POTENTIAL SYSTEM PROBLEMS/TROUBLE SHOOTING

Prompt response to early warning signs can avoid further problems & needless expense.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF A MALFUNCTIONING SYSTEM:

- * Slow draining (or “gurgling”) toilets or household drains
- * Sewage backing up into house
- * Sewage odors, inside or outside
- * Sewage over or near the drainfield
- * Lush, green growth over the drainfield
- * Damp, soggy or wet soil over or near the drainfield
- * Tests indicating bacteria in well water

NOTE: These warning signs **are not always** an indication of a failed system. However, evidence of one or more of them should alert a homeowner to pursue the cause of the problem. System failure may also happen without early warnings.

A COMMON EARLY WARNING SIGN . . . your toilets or other fixtures suddenly begin to drain slowly. This could be the result of overloading the system with wastewater. Consider recent household events that may be affecting your system, such as:

- ✓ Extra guests/children visiting our home
- ✓ Running several loads of laundry in a short time
- ✓ An RV holding tank recently drained into the septic tank
- ✓ Using a garbage disposal
- ✓ Water leaks from toilets or other fixtures
- ✓ The effluent filter is overdue for servicing
- ✓ It has been more than 3-5 years since the system was serviced

Occasional slow draining symptoms caused by a minor plumbing blockage may be relieved by using a plunger or snake. Other suggestions are to monitor and/or change your water usage habits, operational practices and check for fixture leaks.

Persistent slow draining symptoms should trigger an immediate investigation! The diagnosis and correction of persistent problems typically requires a specialist.

A timely inspection by a qualified person will likely reveal conditions, such as:

- * A clogged filter (if installed)
- * Blockage between the tank and drainfield
- * Faulty or deteriorated Tees/Baffles
- * Obstructed inlet or outlet pipes in tank
- * Blockage between the house and septic tank
- * Tree roots
- * Excessive accumulation of sludge and scum
- * Cracked tank, allowing seepage of groundwater into the tank
- * Plugged or improperly installed vent pipes

WORST CASE REPORT: Your drainfield is diagnosed as “failed” and you are told it will need to be replaced. It may be advisable to get a second opinion.

WHAT TO DO? Remember, doctors sometimes misdiagnose a patient. Similarly, the real cause of a malfunctioning septic system may be overlooked by an incomplete inspection. Consider calling for another inspection by a Certified Inspector (see Section 11.0), a licensed septic contractor/installer, or an engineer who is a septic system specialist. Your County Environmental Agency can explain any regulatory issues.

11.0 WHO TO CALL FOR PUMPING, SERVICING & INSPECTIONS

Suggestions: You may have a neighbor or friend who could recommend a service provider they've used -- or check the Yellow Pages under the category of "Septic". This category will often, but not always, show those who are listed as Certified Inspector or NAWT (National Association of Wastewater Transporters, Inc.)Inspector.

WHAT IF I PLAN TO SELL MY PROPERTY? Any person who sells (or otherwise transfers) a property served by an onsite wastewater treatment system is required, **by law**, to retain a qualified inspector to perform a pre-transfer inspection of the system. Qualified inspectors are persons with certain qualifications specified by Code and who have completed special training courses recognized by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ). **NOTE: ADEQ considers such persons the only ones qualified to perform pre-transfer inspections.** A list of NAWT Certified Inspectors can be obtained at the **website** (in bold print) shown at the end of Section 12.0 under University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service.

A competent real estate professional can be invaluable to represent the interests of a seller (or a buyer). They can help ensure contract terms and procedures are followed in a timely manner and that a qualified inspector performs the inspection.

NOTE: Not all Certified Inspectors are qualified to inspect all types of onsite systems.

12.0 GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES AND WASTEWATER GROUPS

Various governmental agencies regulate onsite wastewater systems. Public education is supported by those agencies, private industry, public groups and universities. These include:

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (USEPA) – The Federal agency involved in a wide range of environmental issues including onsite wastewater treatment systems. Below is an excerpt from an EPA statement relating to onsite systems:

“Public health and environmental protection officials now acknowledge that onsite systems are not just temporary installations that will be replaced eventually by centralized sewage treatment services, but permanent approaches to treating wastewater for release and reuse in the environment.”

www.epa.gov

ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY (ADEQ): The state agency that governs the regulations for onsite systems. These regulations are part of Arizona's Administrative Code (A.A.C.) and are implemented by county agencies.

www.azdeq.gov

LOCAL COUNTY DEVELOPMENT SERVICES OR ENVIRONMENTAL/HEALTH AGENCIES: Local agency that administers the onsite wastewater program and other regulatory provisions delegated by ADEQ.

(Go to your local county website)

ARIZONA ONSITE WASTEWATER RECYCLING ASSOCIATION (AzOWRA): A Non-Profit Organization. AzOWRA's primary mission is to provide education and training programs for all onsite industry stakeholders, including homeowners.

Visit the following websites: www.azonsite.org www/septiclocator.com

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE: www.arizona.edu
A valuable source of information about wells, water and wastewater related issues.

The Extension Service facilitates **inspector training courses** for onsite industry professionals to qualify as Inspectors and comply with ADEQ's pre-transfer inspection requirements.

Names of NAWT Certified Inspectors, by zip code, can be found at:

<http://www.nawt.org>

Homeowner's Septic System Service And Maintenance Record

Record keeping is an important part of the operation and maintenance of your onsite system. Complete, as much as possible, the information asked for below. Much of this information can assist persons you call on to inspect, pump or service your system.

Property Information:			
Property Address: _____		Assessor Parcel #: _____	
Subdivision: _____		Lot / Block _____	
Household Information:	Number of Bedrooms When Built: _____	Number of Bedrooms After Addition: _____	
	Number of Toilets When Built: _____	Number of Toilets After Addition: _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hot Tub/Garden Tub/ Multi-head Shower System	<input type="checkbox"/> Reverse Osmosis Water Filter	<input type="checkbox"/> Private Water Supply	
<input type="checkbox"/> Garbage Disposal	<input type="checkbox"/> Water softener	<input type="checkbox"/> Public Water Supply	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____			
CATEGORY OF SYSTEM:		Date Installed: _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Conventional Onsite System		Permit # _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Alternative System		Type or Brand _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Mechanical / Electrical Components _____			
SEPTIC TANK	Number of Tanks: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Concrete	Manufacturer _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Rectangular	<input type="checkbox"/> One Compartment	<input type="checkbox"/> Fiberglass	
<input type="checkbox"/> Round/Oval	<input type="checkbox"/> Multi-Compartment	<input type="checkbox"/> Plastic	Capacity (Gallons) _____
PUMP TANK	Capacity (Gallons) _____	Pump Horsepower _____	Manufacturer _____
Location of Power Switch _____			
System Features:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Septic Tank Effluent Filter		<input type="checkbox"/> Siphon / Pump	
<input type="checkbox"/> Distribution Box / Flow Divider		<input type="checkbox"/> High Water Alarm	
<input type="checkbox"/> Diversion Valve		<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	
DRAINFIELD OR DISPOSAL METHOD		Length of Field (sq. foot / Linear foot) _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pipe & Gravel (Conventional)		Number of Trenches: _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Chambers		<input type="checkbox"/> Bed - Bed Dimensions: _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Drip Irrigation		<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	

IMPORTANT CONTACTS FOR ASSISTANCE

Install Contractor	Phone: _____
Septic Tank Pumper	Phone: _____
Maintenance Contractor	Phone: _____
County Environmental Agency	Phone: _____

SERVICE AND MAINTENANCE RECORD ON FOLLOWING PAGE

