



STATE OF WISCONSIN
Department of Safety and Professional Services

POWTS – What to do after a flood

Where can I find information on my septic system?

Please contact your county zoning/health department that oversees the regulation of POWTS for additional advice and assistance. For more information on onsite/decentralized wastewater systems, check out the DPS website at WWW.DSPS.WI.GOV or email at DSPSSBPowtstech@wisconsin.gov

What do I do during the flood or saturated drain-field conditions?

Do not pump any tanks or pump chambers. At best, pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. Never open any manhole covers or other openings that are under flood water. Not only is this dangerous for your personal safety, flood water and associated debris like mud and silt will enter the system and possibly back up into your home. Under worst conditions, pumping it out could cause the tank to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes. The best solution is to plug all drains in the basement, turn off electricity to the system at the circuit box and drastically reduce water use in the house. Do not dig into the tank or drain-field area while the soil is still wet or flooded. Try to avoid any work on or around the disposal field with heavy machinery while the soil is still wet. These activities will ruin the soil conductivity.

What do I do with my septic system after the flood?

Once floodwaters have receded, there are several things homeowners should remember:

- Do not drink well water until it is tested. Contact your local health department.
- Do not use the POWTS until water in the soil absorption field is lower than the water level around the house.
- Continue to conserve water until the soil around the POWTS dries out
- Have your septic tank professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling or an inability to accept water. Most septic tanks are not damaged by flooding since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and debris, and must be professionally cleaned. If the soil absorption field is clogged with silt, a new system may have to be installed. If a repair is necessary, contact your county POWTS Specialist to determine if a permit is needed. Permits are usually expedited in cases of emergency such as floods.
- Only trained specialists should clean or repair septic tanks because tanks may contain dangerous gases. Contact the County POWTS Specialist for a list of septic system contractors who work in your area.
- If sewage has backed up into the basement, clean the area and disinfect the floor. Use a chlorine solution of a half cup of chlorine bleach to each gallon of water to disinfect the area thoroughly. Sewage contains organisms that can make you ill.
- Pump the septic system as soon as possible after the flood. Be sure to pump both the tank and lift station. This will remove silt and debris that may have washed into the system. Do not pump the tank during flooded or saturated drain-field conditions.
- Do not compact the soil over the soil absorption field by driving or operating equipment in the area. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can reduce the soil absorption field's ability to treat wastewater and lead to system failure.
- Examine all electrical and mechanical devices for damage. Clean and allow them to dry out before restoring electricity.

- Pretreatment devices such as aerobic treatment units and other units should be inspected to ensure that filters and air/water lines have not been plugged.
- Be sure the septic tank's manhole cover is secure and that inspection ports have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the vegetation over your septic tank and soil absorption field. Repair erosion damage and sod or reseed areas as necessary to provide turf grass cover.

Remember: Whenever the water table is high or your sewage system is threatened by flooding there is a risk that sewage will back up into your home. The only way to prevent this backup is to relieve pressure on the system by using it less.

Reference: www.epa.gov/safewater EPA 816-F-05-029 September 2005