

Clallam County

Educating Homeowners About Their Septic Systems



Man inspecting his septic tank

Introduction

Did you know that if you have a home on-site septic system you are now required to have it inspected every one to three years, depending on what type of system you have? Wow, really? Not to worry, people in Clallam County can now rest assured they have help at their fingertips. Knowing the inspection requirement would concern many residents, the county set out to develop a plan to help. They piloted a “Do It Yourself” (DIY) inspection training program in 2011.

Did you know?

Liquid fabric softener is not good for septic systems. Think about it: if fabric softener fluffs up your towels, what does it do to toilet paper and poop? A fluffy, clean smelling septic tank is not normal!

As part of this program, homeowners needed to attend a free “Septics 101” workshop or take the class online. The county developed a quarterly newsletter and sent it to every residential septic system owner throughout the county. They distributed ten issues of the newsletter, packed full of tips and information about regulations and water quality. The box at right is just one of the county’s many useful and interesting “tips.”

Problem

When your septic system fails, it’s more than a wet stinky mess. It’s expensive to repair and it’s a health hazard to you, your family, and your pets. The problem may not be limited to your yard. Runoff from a failing septic system can carry untreated sewage across your yard, to your neighbor’s property, or into surface waters – lakes, streams, or Puget Sound. Commercial shellfish growing and recreational shellfish harvest have been prohibited in Dungeness Bay in areas where fecal coliform levels are high enough to cause a health concern for shellfish consumption.

The lack of routine inspection and maintenance of home on-site septic systems was an identified issue in the Dungeness Bay shellfish downgrade and water cleanup (TMDL) response plan, along with several other nonpoint and watershed plans. A Marine Recovery Area (MRA) was established to address the water quality issues for the Dungeness watershed. Within the MRA, septic system owners must have a recent inspection performed by a licensed professional. The county’s idea was that homeowners who have completed DIY training will continue to inspect and maintain their septic system after a professional conducts the first assessment.

Project goals

The ultimate goal was to improve water quality by improving management of home onsite septic systems. The primary goals were:

- Produce a report on developing a homeowner DIY septic inspection program to be shared with other jurisdictions.
- Develop an inspection manual for septic system designs to include: conventional gravity; pressurized distribution; sand filter; and mound systems.
- Train up to 200 county residents to inspect their own septic systems.



- Inspect up to 200 septic systems, giving priority to homes in the Clean Water District (MRA).
- Fix systems found to be failing or in need of repairs.

Milestones and outcomes

The project was successful in educating home on-site septic system owners in the MRA about why, when, and how to conduct septic system maintenance. The pilot project for the DIY training resulted in the return of more than 100 self-inspections and 90 evaluation surveys. Participants felt empowered to recognize and correct system problems before they caused a larger problem.



Fifteen homeowners who identified problems with their systems reported they made the necessary corrections or improvements. Approximately ten homeowners made system improvements such as installing outlet baffle filters or risers on the septic tank. Three systems found to be near failure due to backed up or

overly full tanks had the problems identified and corrected. The water quality improvements resulting educational activities are impossible to quantify. However, the number of routine inspection reports submitted to the county rose from 149 in 2009 to 584 in 2011.

DIY pilot project highlights

The resulting products under the DIY pilot included an online easy-to-follow, detailed training course. This course includes a training video; a field guide, and checklist for different types of septic systems as well as one with instructions for all types of systems; safety guidelines; exam; inspection audit process; an on-line inspection report; and a participant survey. During the project period, the conditional (seasonal) upgrade of 500 acres of Dungeness Bay commercial/recreational shellfish growing area occurred.

Partners

Local project partners include on-site septic (OSS) industry professionals, Clallam County OSS Work Group, Jones Advertising (contractor for the video training), Clean Water Work Group partners who were involved in the watershed's cleanup plan, and Dungeness River Audubon Center.

Funding

This project was funded in 2009 by a grant from the Centennial Clean Water Fund and Clean Water Act Section 319 Nonpoint Source Fund. The overall cost was \$303,475. Ecology's grant amount was \$227,606.

For more information

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