



The Waste Stream

A periodic publication of District Health Department #10

HOW NOT TO "SEE RED"



Regardless of whom installs the septic system – a licensed contractor or a homeowner – District Health Department #10 attempts to do a final inspection on it prior to it being covered. Local health departments are required by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to conduct final inspections on at least 90% of the septic systems installed. District #10 typically inspects closer to 95% of the installations. When problems are found, the sanitarian will “red tag” the construction. If this occurs, all work on the septic system must stop until corrections are made. Under no conditions, is the septic system to be covered after a red tag has been issued. The red tag – this will typically be left on the septic tank lid – should have an explanation of the problem(s) found. Nevertheless, if you receive a red tag you should always contact the sanitarian to discuss the issue and to make sure that you are aware of what is needed to obtain approval.

No one likes to see a red tag. Red tags will cost you money with equipment being tied up at the site as well as potentially expensive corrections. Corrections can range from small changes to the layout of the pipes to moving the entire septic system. In addition, you may be required to pay a re-inspection for the sanitarian to confirm that the corrections have been properly made. Worst of all may be the loss of confidence of the homeowner in the ability of his contractor to do the job well.

In 2007, District Health Department #10 issued 103 red tags. This was 6% of the final septic system inspections that we performed. The reasons for the red tags are as follows:

- ❖ 23% due to poor construction – dirty stone, too little stone, no footer, incorrect spacing of pipes, inspection ports installed wrong, incorrect connection to the header.
- ❖ 20% due to the drainfield being too small.
- ❖ 15% due to the septic system being too close to a well.
- ❖ 14% due to the drainfield being installed too low (wrong elevation).
- ❖ 11% due to the septic tank lacking a baffle.
- ❖ 5% due to a pump chamber being installed wrong.
- ❖ 4% due to the septic tank being installed wrong.
- ❖ 8 % due to a variety of problems – trees being located too close, isolation problems with surface water (Wild and Scenic Rivers), septic systems being installed in the wrong location and septic systems already covered when the sanitarian visits the site.

How to avoid a red tag?

- 1) **Read the permit.** Too often the problem resulted from the contractor not reading the permit. The permit has all of the construction requirements, site plan, and special conditions concerning the project. If you have not received a copy of the permit, ask the sanitarian for a copy. It is recommended that you do NOT bid a project until you have read a copy of the permit. If you read the permit and do not understand it – don't guess – call the sanitarian. A major problem continues to be contractors who install drainfield at the standard depth while the permit calls for an elevated septic system.
- 2) **Check what you buy.** Do not assume that the septic tank that is delivered to the site is correct. Always double check it. Does it have a baffle in it? Is it the correct size? Is it at the correct depth? Is it put in the right way (we have seen some installed backwards)?
- 3) **Do not assume that what is approved by one local health department is approved by all.** If you only occasionally work in District #10, be sure to read the Sanitary Code and be sure you understand it. Every local health department in Michigan has a different Sanitary Code and they may vary widely. What is approved in one may not be approved in another. If in doubt, ask the sanitarian before you proceed.
- 4) **Always do a final set of measurements.** Make sure that the drainfield is correctly sized. Take a final measurement to all wells – not just the ones on the property but neighboring wells also to ensure that they meet the isolation distances.
- 5) **Call for the final inspection in advance.** It is recommended that you provide the sanitarian with an estimated time of completion. This will allow the sanitarian to schedule the inspection close to your completion time.

Hopefully this will prevent the septic system from being kept open for a long period of time and will prevent you needing to leave equipment for a long time at the site. NEVER cover the septic system unless you have had an inspection or if you have permission from the sanitarian to do so.

WHEN SEPTIC SYSTEMS GO BAD !!!!



Within the district, we find that most septic systems last 25 to 30 years. For the most part this means that each generation in the home will need to install a septic system. We are always looking at ways to extend the life of septic systems and we are continually exploring new methods and technologies to do so. A successful septic system requires the actions of three people – the sanitarian who properly designs it, the contractor who properly installs it, and the homeowner who properly maintains it. As you already know, the weakest link in this effort tends to be the homeowner. Maintenance of the septic systems is critical if it is to continue to function as it should. The following are tips that both the sanitarian and the contractor should be educating the homeowner on to ensure a long life for their septic system:

- Avoid using septic tank additives
- Have the tank pumped every 3 to 5 years
- Minimize excess water use
- Minimize garbage disposal use; compost or throw food wastes in the garbage
- Avoid planting trees around the system, especially near the absorption field inlet pipe
- Avoid flushing any object or substance that does not easily decompose
- Avoid vehicular traffic and construction activities in the absorption field area before and after installation
- Divert run-off water from your lawn, roof and basement drain away from the absorption field
- Prevent chemicals and petroleum products from entering the system

WHAT PART OF “NO” DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND?

For the most part, some of the best soils for on-site septic systems can be found in District Health Department #10. We are even the site for the location of the official State of Michigan Soil – Kalkaska Sand. Therefore there typically are few

limitations for the septic systems within the District. The two main problems that we have to deal with are property size (too small of a lot) and a high water table. According to the Sanitary Code there are seven reasons why a property would be denied for a septic system:

- 1) Connection to a public sewer is available.
- 2) The septic tank would be inaccessible for cleaning.
- 3) The property is too small for proper isolation distances to a well.
- 4) Less than 12 inches of soil above the seasonal high water table.
- 5) Unsuitable soils (heavy clay)
- 6) Area is in a floodplain.
- 7) Conditions exist that may endanger the health of the public or the environment.

For 2007, District #10 denied 15 applications for septic permits out of a total of 2,031 – less than 1%. The reasons for the denials were as follows:

- ✓ 32% of the denials were the result of a high water table (less than 12 inches of dry soil).
- ✓ 21% of the denials were the result of unsuitable soils (heavy clay).
- ✓ 21% of the denials were because of the property being too small.
- ✓ 18% of the denials were because isolation could not be maintained from a well.
- ✓ 4% of the denials were because municipal sewer was available.
- ✓ 4% of the denials were the result of the septic tank locations being inaccessible.

Whenever property is denied, we advise the owner to obtain the services of an engineer to design an alternative septic system for the property. The owner can also request a hearing before the appeals board. In 2007 there were no appeals.



District Health Department #10

What's New?

In addition to starting work on a new uniform sanitary code for the entire district, we have also had a large number of staff changes. Things have settled down with adequate staff coverage, but you are likely to see some new faces. For example, **Frank Palatka**, who was the sanitarian to Missaukee County has moved and is now servicing Manistee County. We also have a new employee in Wexford County – **Marc Grossnickle**. Marc is filling the vacancy left when Tori Weitzel resigned (who decided to get married and move down-state). Marc has most recently worked for the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department and has over 11 years of field experience. Finally, we have **Michelle Hill** returning to us on a part time basis in Missaukee County.

The implementation of the new sanitary code has progressed very smoothly but there is still a great deal of work to do. We did not see any increase in the number of property denials or “red tag” issuance. Therefore, any negative impact from the code has been small. Writing policies for the agency may sound boring but it is an important part of running a program. Policies guide our staff in making decisions as to what is acceptable and what is not. Policies for the new sanitary code have not been written. Therefore, as issues arose this summer, we have been reviewing them on a case-by-case basis. This process is time consuming and can lead to inconsistent decisions. This problem should be solved this winter when **Dick Courson**, the supervisor for the septic/well program, will be putting the policies down in writing.

The septic contractor licensing program is going very well. Presently, over 220 contractors have applied. In accordance with the sanitary code, the license fees must be used for contractor education and training. Dick Courson is now planning a series of half-day meetings for the spring of 2009. We will mail out the notice of the time and locations of the meetings as we get closer to the dates. The meetings are voluntary but we hope to see you there.

Efforts are underway to begin a point-of-sale (POS) program in Kalkaska and Manistee counties. A POS program requires an inspection of the well and septic system whenever a property is sold. Presently, Brooks Township in Newaygo County already has such a program. The inspections can be performed by either the district or a private contractor. The State of Michigan is also very actively seeking to establish a POS program.

One final note, please complete the enclosed survey and send it back to us. Our goal is to ensure the best septic systems possible for the residents of the district. In order to reach this goal we need to ensure that the contractors have the assistance they need to install the best septic systems.

Stay safe and enjoy the Fall.

Tom Reichard
Environmental Health Director

DISTRICT HEALTH DEPARTMENT #10

Contact List



Crawford County

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EH Clerk - Ruth Doyle

Lake County

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Sanitarian - Matt Fournier
231-316-8576
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Kalkaska

625 Cour
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Sanitarian - Dick Courson ***
231-314-8627
EH Clerk - Alice Reber
*** Supervisor for Septic/Well
Program

Manistee County

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Big Rapids, MI 49307
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EH Clerk - Jackie Sullivan

Missaukee County

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Lake City, MI 49651

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Sanitarian - Michelle Hill (part time)
231-236-7582

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Newaygo County

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Sanitarians - Lin Brown, Ryan Gyurich
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Oceana County

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Wexford County

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Sanitarian - Marc Grossnickle
231-876-3847

EH Clerk - Berneita Childress

Environmental Health Director - Tom Reichard (Wexford office)
231-876-3820

Subdivision and Condominium Specialist - Marc Soles (Mason office)
231-316-8565



Septic Contractor Survey

**District Health Department #10
(October 2008)**

1) Do you feel that septic permits were issued in a timely fashion?

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

2) Do you feel that the sanitarian has been able to satisfactorily answer your questions at the site?

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

3) If you have a question, have you been able to easily reach the sanitarian? (___never had a question)

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

4) When you made an appointment with the sanitarian, did they arrive on time? (___never made an appointment)

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

5) Calling in for a final inspection has been easy?

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

6) Final inspections have always been done in a timely manner?

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

7) The requirements on the permits are clear and easy to understand?

___Always ___Most of the time ___Sometimes ___Never

How can we improve service to your firm: _____

Primary County that you work in: _____

Please mail back to District Health Department #10, 521 Cobbs St., Cadillac, MI 49601 or fax to 231-775-5372