

**MAINE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOOD AND RURAL RESOURCES
OFFICE OF THE STATE SOIL SCIENTIST
STATE HOUSE STATION # 28
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333
PHONE: (207) 287-2666
E-MAIL: DAVID.ROCQUE@MAINE.GOV**

Guidelines for the Burial of Non-Commercial Homeowner's Small Pets, Including Dogs, Cats, Hamsters, Fish, Rabbits, Etc.

February 14, 2012

Background:

Many of us have pets which we love dearly and consider to be a part of the family. They enrich our lives and bring us pleasure. Unfortunately, pets do not live forever and all eventually die of natural causes, an accident or have to be put down due to a fatal injury or ailment. We are then left with the decision of what to do with the remains left behind. If the pet is taken to a vet to be put down, the remains can be left at the veterinarian's office for final disposition. If the pet dies at home, final disposition is up to the homeowner. The homeowner can take the pet to the veterinarian's office for final disposition or handle final disposition on their own property. The most common method of final disposition on the homeowner's property is by burial. A newly emerging technique for final disposition is by composting but this technique requires knowledge of composting procedures and developing the right mix of composting ingredients to be successful. For the most part, composting is a technique most applicable to situations where there are large numbers of animals needing final disposition. Therefore, the focus of these guidelines will be on the burial of pets.

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources, administers Chapter 211- Disposal of Animal Carcasses. Chapter 211 covers "Rules and Regulations Relating to Disease Control of Domestic Animals and Poultry". As the title of these Rules indicate, their thrust is on the control of disease but the rules also include requirements designed to ensure environmental protection, avoidance of a public nuisance, minimizing odors and controlling flies. Chapter 211 applies to the disposal of all domestic animal carcasses but there is an exemption for non-commercial pet owners who wish to dispose of their own small pets on their own land. The disposal of larger pets such as horses is not exempt from Chapter 211. Being exempt from the Rules however, does not mean that there are no issues of concern for the homeowner to consider.

Following are a few of the considerations a homeowner should weigh when disposing of a pet on their property:

1. **Disease** – The control of disease is one of the most important reasons why a pet should be disposed of properly. Not only diseases which can infect other pets but a few can also infect humans. That is why it is not a good idea to leave the pet where it lies or to throw it into the woods or a field to decompose. People or a pet may come in contact with the carcass and become infected. Some dogs like to roll in rotten carcasses, becoming a disease vector and source of an odor problem.
2. **Environmental Impact** – Decomposition and resulting leachate (liquid released from the decomposition process) from a single small pet does not result in a significant environmental threat, if it dies of natural causes. If however, pets of any size are euthanized, their body will contain chemicals that are harmful to animals and humans. Larger carcasses or larger volumes of small animal carcasses may produce enough leachate during decomposition to cause an environmental impact and should be disposed of accordingly.
3. **Drinking Water Supplies** – It does not take much leachate from the decomposition of an animal, even a small one, to contaminate a well. Therefore, it is important to dispose of them in a way that would minimize impacts to wells. All wells are a concern but dug wells are the biggest concerns as they utilize shallow groundwater or surface water.
4. **Odors** – If a pet is disposed of improperly and/or not disposed of in a timely manner in the summer months, it may become a source of a very objectionable odor. Not only could that odor be concern for the homeowner, it might trigger a complaint from a neighbor. The Maine Department of Agriculture has a complaint program which would respond to such complaints. If the complaint is found to be valid, the homeowner would be required to take appropriate action to take care of the problem.
5. **Flies** – Pets not disposed of properly or soon enough can become infested with flies. Not only can flies become a nuisance to you and/or your neighbors (and result in a complaint), they can also transmit certain diseases to humans and/or pets.
6. **Visual** – To many people, a decomposing animal carcass is quite visually disturbing.

Burial Guidelines for Homeowner's Own Small Pets on their Own Land:

In order to properly bury a small pet on your own land, the carcass must be buried in a suitable location and at a suitable depth. The degree of concern over the suitability of the site and technique has a direct relationship with the size of the animal or volume of small animals. A single gold fish or mouse is not much of a concern but a 120 lb. dog is. If the carcass is not buried deep enough, it may be dug up by an animal and become a source of disease, odors and flies. If buried too deeply or in the wrong location, it may not decompose and remain intact for a very long time. It might also cause contamination of a nearby drinking water supply. Following are suggested guidelines for burying small pets on a homeowners land:

1. Choose a site that is high and dry. You ideally want a site with a deep seasonal groundwater table (minimal contributing watershed). Wet soils are anaerobic (lack oxygen) and result in very slow decomposition as well as contamination of the groundwater table.
2. The site should be downslope from any well, particularly a dug well. If you can not find a suitable site downslope from a well, try to locate one that is opposite from the well, at the same elevation. If the burial site must be upslope of a well, it should be setback from the well a distance commensurate with the size and/or volume of the carcass(es). The larger the carcass or the greater the volume of carcasses, the greater the setback should be. In all cases, try to maintain a minimum 50 foot setback with a 100 foot setback for large pets and/or large volumes.
3. The site should be setback 50 feet or more from streams, lakes, ponds, rivers, drainage ditches, drainage swales etc.
4. Make sure the site is not shallow to bedrock. Leachate from a decomposing carcass can enter a bedrock fracture and contaminate a deep drilled well a long way from the burial site.
5. Dig a hole about 18" deep or less making sure you have at least 12" of soil between any carcass and bedrock. Any deeper and the decomposition process will be very slow and there is a greater possibility of contaminating the groundwater table.
6. Cover the carcass with at least 18" of soil. That may require the mounding of soil over the carcass. We have found that 18" of soil cover will prevent the digging up of buried carcasses.
7. For properties that do not have ideal soils for burial, suitable soils can be engineered. The easiest way to do this is to place the carcass on the ground surface and then cover it with at least 18" of soil. You may also have to add soil to the ground surface first, to achieve the 12" separation from bedrock or the groundwater table. After the carcass has decomposed, the fill material can be removed, restoring the site to its natural condition or left in place for future burials.
8. Check the burial site periodically for any digging by animals. Replace any soil dug away so that at least 18" of cover remains over the carcass.

Composting:

Composting is an excellent technique for final disposition of a deceased pet. If you have a compost pile that is active, the pet can be placed in the compost. **DO NOT USE ANY RESULTING COMPOST IN YOUR VEGETABLE GARDEN AS IT MAY CONTAIN VIABLE PATHOGENS!** You can also use compost for cover material in a burial instead of soil. In that case, use a minimum of 24" of cover. For farmers with stackable manure piles, the pet can be buried in the manure to compost.

If you have any questions, contact the Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources at 287-1132 or 287-2666.