

Frequently asked questions about septic systems and the Maine Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules.

How do I find a copy of my septic system's design?

Your fastest option is to visit the Town Office and request a copy of the HHE-200 Form (design and permit application) for your property. With very few exceptions it is the Town's responsibility to maintain these records; most include septic designs in complete files kept for every property. Please remember that available records only cover systems installed after the July, 1974, effective date of the Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules. Few records exist for subsurface wastewater disposal systems installed prior to July, 1974.

If the Town does not have a copy on file, a search through our [online database](#) might produce the design you're seeking. Please note that we cannot guarantee the availability of all septic designs in Maine through our database; the Subsurface Wastewater Program can provide only those records that are supplied by participating Towns.

How do I know if I need a soil test?

The general rule of thumb is that a soil test (site evaluation) is needed any time sewage, wastewater, or human waste is being placed beneath the ground in a location where there was none before. This includes all first time development, all replacement systems, and expansions of existing systems. This also includes pit privies, greywater disposal areas, and full septic systems.

How do I know if I need a septic system permit?

If you needed a site evaluation, you will also need a permit to install the system for which the evaluation was done. If you aren't sure, contact your Local Plumbing Inspector or the Division.

The design my Site Evaluator gave me will be expensive to install. Can I install a holding tank instead?

Generally speaking, holding tanks are an option of last resort, because they do not solve the problem of wastewater treatment, they just relocate the problem. If a bona-fide system can be installed on a property, holding tanks are not allowed. Further, while the initial installation costs may be lower, pumping costs over the long term can be prohibitive (especially for year round use). In fact, a holding tank can not be used for any first time residential development unless the Municipality has adopted a Model Holding Tank Ordinance from the Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules, which makes the Municipality responsible for maintaining the holding tank.

I bought my undeveloped lot many years ago, and it recently failed a site evaluation. Is my lot "grandfathered" for a septic system because of the length of time I have owned it?

No. Your lot is only grandfathered for the level of development it had when the relevant standards were adopted. In this instance, the Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules were adopted in July of 1974. Any first time sewage disposal systems to be installed since then must meet the minimum site suitability requirements of the Rules.

If my undeveloped lot fails a site evaluation, is there some form of advanced treatment unit that I can install instead of a conventional system?

No. All first time system designs must meet the minimum standards of the Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules, even advanced treatment units.

If my undeveloped waterfront lot fails a site evaluation, can I install fill soils to create a suitable site?

No. Fill soils are allowed for first time systems only if the fill has been in place prior to 1974 (when the Rules became effective) inside the shoreland zone. This gives the fill soils enough time to settle and develop drainage characteristics similar to original soils.

My existing septic system has failed. What should I do?

The first thing to do is pump out your septic tank, to eliminate wastewater flow to the malfunctioning disposal area, and keep it pumped out until the system is replaced. You must also contact a licensed Site Evaluator to design a replacement system. She or he will provide you with the necessary design to apply for a plumbing permit from the Local Plumbing Inspector to install the system.

My existing septic system has failed. What happens if my lot does not pass a site evaluation?

The Subsurface Wastewater Disposal Rules take into account that developed properties may have difficulties meeting the minimum standards of the Rules. Therefore, the Rules have provisions for issuing replacement system variances which will accommodate the existing development on the property, so that use of the property may continue.

I don't have enough cash to install the replacement system. Is there help available?

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection (1-800-452-1942) offers several community-based loans and grants. The Maine State Housing Authority offers assistance for low income homeowners ((207) 626-4600 or 1-800-452-4668). Many banks and credit unions offer home improvement loans. Finally, by statute (30-A MRSA, ss 3428(3)(B)), a municipality may install a system on a lot, and recover the costs through a special tax assessment.

Do you need more information? Contact the Division by telephone (207) 287-5689, Fax (207) 287-3165, TTY (207) 287-2070 (Deaf/Hard of Hearing), or [e-mail](#). Our mailing address is DHHS-DHE, 11 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0011.