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TREND TOWARD PERIODIC SEPTIC SYSTEM INSPECTION

By: Ted Loudon

It has long been recognized that most homeowners pay little attention to their septic systems until they have a problem. The most common symptoms of a problem are either the flow from the house is slowed or septic effluent begins to surface over the drainfield. Septic systems are often cited as sources of surface and groundwater pollution and these problems are often attributed to failing systems. Neglect contributes to premature failure and shorter life of septic systems.

A few communities around the country have established management programs that involve having a third party professional look at all septic systems on a regular basis and do whatever maintenance is necessary. Each management visit includes checking both septic tank and drainfield for proper function. Communities that have management programs have found that, once management programs are established, they do not deal with septic system failures but identify any needs for maintenance and fix systems before they become failures and environmental or public health problems. Centralized management of all systems will likely be established in Michigan at some time in the future and we need to begin to prepare homeowners to welcome this.

In 2000, the Michigan Legislature considered a bill that would have required regular management of all systems but did not pass the legislation. The Rouge River Watershed instigated a requirement that all systems be inspected at the time of property transactions beginning in 2000. Other local health departments have begun requiring inspections at the time of sale and some are considering broader management programs that would require periodic inspection and maintenance of alternative onsite wastewater treatment systems and eventually all systems.

Some mortgage companies require septic system inspections at the time of sale. So, for a variety of reasons, septic system inspections are becoming more commonplace. Buyers appreciate the assurance that the septic system at the home they are buying has been evaluated by a professional and they are given information regarding its condition and current performance. However, most inspections are not sufficient to determine how the system will perform under a new pattern of use that could involve a larger family and/or higher water usage patterns. Lending agencies also appreciate the assurance that is provided by a septic system inspection.

Homeowners need to be provided with information that will help them understand the importance and the value that can be provided to them by having a third party professional regularly inspect and maintain their system. Dealing with a septic system is about the last thing that most homeowners want to do themselves so having a professional provide the service of inspection and maintenance is the best way to assure that it will be done. Proper inspection and maintenance will not only prevent the homeowner from experiencing a sudden problem but will also help protect public health and the environment. While most homeowners may initially feel that they do not need professional management for their systems, the peace of mind and environmental protection will, in the long-term, outweigh the cost.

A cadre of inspectors is developing as more mortgage companies and health jurisdictions require time of sale inspections. With assistance from the Rouge Watershed Wet Weather Project, we have developed a training program at the Michigan Onsite Wastewater Training and Education Center (MOWTEC) to produce competent septic system inspectors. The next training program for inspectors is scheduled for August 12-13, 2003 at MOWTEC which is located at the MSU Tollgate Educational Center in Novi. Information about this and other training programs is

available on the [Agricultural Engineering website](#) (Click on Calendar of Events) or can be obtained from Barb DeLong at 517-355-4720.

MSUE has a good bulletin that local extension offices can provide to homeowners to begin to build awareness. It is in the form of a folder in which they can keep records about their septic system. The folder also provides basic educational information for the owner. This is Extension Bulletin WQ39. The bulletin costs \$.50 and should be made available at all Extension Offices or by calling the Bulletin Office at (517) 355-0240. For people who seek more detailed information, Midwest Plan Service-24 provides extensive detail on conventional and alternative septic systems. It is available from Nancy Aitcheson, Plan Service Secretary in the AE Department at 517-353-3297 or email aitches1@msu.edu.

A one-day training program on Septic and Alternative Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems is being scheduled by the MSUE Water Quality AOE for extension agents. Contact Lois Wolfson (wolfson@msue.msu.edu, (517) 353-9222) for details.