FACT SHEET: Flooded Septic Tanks and Drainfields - Flood Recovery

If you have a septic tank and drainfield or other subsurface sewage disposal system, the system may have stopped working during and after the recent floods. This may be an indication that replacement or repair work needs to be done, or it is possible that no work needs to be done and the system may resume working when the water has subsided and the soil is no longer saturated.

If your sewage disposal system has stopped working and wastewater has backed up into your plumbing, it is important that you stop putting additional waste or water into the system until it is repaired or has resumed working. Do not pump the septic tank, and do not assume that your plumbing is plugged. It is likely that the system is just flooded with water and temporarily cannot accept any more. Arrange for alternative toilet facilities. Use those of a neighbor or arrange for placement of chemical toilets near your home for the time being.

Wastewater that you produce while the system is not working may be poured into a hole dug in the ground in a location at least 100 feet away from any well, stream or other water body. The hole should be covered between uses to ensure that it is not a safety hazard to people or animals. Toilet waste can be disposed of in this same manner during cleanup and recovery. Since wastewater is usually contaminated to some degree it should not be merely poured on the surface of the ground and <u>should never be thrown into stream, rivers, ponds, lakes or ditches leading to them</u>.

Inspect the area where your septic flank and drainfield or other subsurface disposal system is located to see if the system is visibly damaged. If floodwaters have washed out or exposed any portion of the disposal system, it will be necessary that it be repaired before you resume use of it. Be sure to contact your local health department and State Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) representative before you do any significant repair or modification to a disposal system. If the system has been deeply buried by silt, it may be necessary to
remove some of the excessive cover over the disposal area. While the disposal system is flooded it is very unlikely that the system will work at all, and it could be a number of days or weeks after the surface water disappears before the soil will be able to absorb wastewater. All you can do is wait until the water recedes and the ground begins to dry out.

Septic tanks and other submerged tanks should never be pumped or cleaned when soils are saturated or groundwater tables are within five feet of the surface of the ground. An empty or partially pumped tank may collapse from the outside pressure, or worse yet, the tank may be lifted out of the ground by the weight of water around it.

You should contact your local county health department and the closest office of state DEQ for specific advice and assistance if your system is visibly damaged or will not work after the floodwater subsides.

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Technical Advice and Information:
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Office of Environmental Public Health - Environmental Toxicology Section
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URL. http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/ophs/index.shtml