

## Service the Septic System

Septic systems play an essential role in effectively treating wastewater in areas without municipal sewage treatment. A properly designed, maintained and managed system can provide adequate treatment for most pollutants and is key to minimizing failures and resulting environmental impacts.

Septic system failures release untreated wastewater into the environment. Untreated wastewater contains excessive nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) that can harm native plant and fish populations in Kentucky's surface waters. Wastewater's excessive organic matter can choke off the oxygen supply to streams and rivers. Bacteria levels in impacted waters can exceed regulated body contact standards, abruptly halting recreational use of beaches, lakes and streams.

**How it works:** The primary treatment device is the septic tank. This is a large chamber that collects household sewage. Waste enters the tank through piping from your home. The liquid waste (99.99% water) passes through the tank and is dispersed in a soil absorption field. Solids are separated through settling. Those components that are lighter than water (oils, fats) as well as solids that are heavier than water are retained in the septic tank. Some of the solid material retained in the septic tank breaks down into gaseous by-products which are vented through your home's plumbing vent system. The remaining solids that do not biodegrade accumulate in the tank and must be removed every few years.

**Maintenance and Care:** The best thing you can do for the health of your septic system is to have it serviced regularly by a qualified professional to check for cracks or leaks and to pump the solids retained in your septic tank every 3 to 5 years.

With regular maintenance and by implementing a few simple daily habits, you can improve the long-term function of the septic system.

- *DO* conserve water: reduce shower times, match laundry setting to load size, spread out wash loads throughout the week, and turn off the faucet while shaving or brushing your teeth. Excess wastewater can overload the system.
- *DO NOT* flush anything but toilet paper and human waste down the toilet. Items such as facial tissues, flushable wipes, dental floss, or cat litter can damage your system.
- *DO NOT* pour harsh chemicals such as solvents and paints down the drain and minimize use of bleach and chemical cleaning products to protect helpful bacteria.
- *DO NOT* park or drive over your septic system with anything heavier than a riding lawn mower.

**Remember!** Everything that is put down the drain or toilet will end up in the septic system and eventually in the environment.

Suggested Social Media Text:

Failed septic systems release untreated wastewater to the environment which has negative human health and the environmental impacts. Regular service of your septic system is key to maintain its performance for the long-term. Educating your family and implementing some simple in-home best practices will also minimize problems and contribute to healthy function of your system.

## **For Agents: References and Resources**

### **References for this Article:**

HENV 502: Septic System Failure and Environmental Impacts

<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/HENV/HENV502/HENV502.pdf>

HENV 503: Septic Tanks: The Primary Treatment Device of Septic Systems

<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/HENV/HENV503/HENV503.pdf>

HENV 505: Impacts of Additives on Septic System Performance

<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/HENV/HENV505/HENV505.pdf>

### **Additional Resources:**

Link to ENRI webpage for additional septic system references:

<https://water.ca.uky.edu/wastewater>

Link to KY Dept of Health page on Septic Systems:

<https://chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/dphps/emb/Pages/environmentmgmt.aspx>

Link to Washington State Health Dept. Video on [Septic System Basics](#)

While the specifics will not apply in KY, it is a very succinct review of the basic components, function and potential issues with septic systems.