



## DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS

# General Guidelines for Maintaining Your Septic System

The following are general guidelines on the proper maintenance of a septic system serving residential and commercial properties in Worcester County.

### **What maintenance do I need to perform on my septic system?**

Regular inspection and periodic septic tank pump-outs by a licensed liquid waste hauler are essential in the long-term care and maintenance of your septic system. The most common reasons for septic system failure are improper use and lack of periodic pumping of the septic tank. A septic tank is designed so that solids and other material settle and form a sludge layer at the bottom of your tank. A licensed liquid waste hauler will remove this layer to prevent any solids from clogging your disposal system and causing premature system failure. Proper system maintenance is the responsibility of the property owner. By performing a few simple maintenance procedures and having a proper system pump-out, you can save on costly repairs to your septic system.

### **What if I have a BAT Pre-treatment Unit tank as part of my septic system?**

If you have a nitrogen-reducing BAT (Best Available Technology) unit instead of a conventional septic tank, Maryland law requires that the BAT be inspected by a certified service provider and have necessary operation and maintenance performed at a minimum of once a year. The certified service provider will determine any maintenance required of your BAT unit including periodic pump-outs. Owners of BAT units should have received a homeowner's guide covering the proper care and operation of the system.

The Code of Maryland Regulations COMAR 26.04.02 establishes requirements for on-site sewage disposal systems within the Chesapeake Bay Critical Area or Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area. Effective November 24, 2016, State regulations amended the requirements for Best Available Technology (BAT) for properties within the Chesapeake Bay of Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Areas. The requirements apply to permit applications for septic tanks, drainfields, drywells, sand mound systems, pressure dosed beds and any other type of on-site sewage disposal system on a property in the Chesapeake or Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area. New Construction or the replacement of septic systems outside the Critical Area are not required to install a BAT.

The regulation establishes Best Available Technology (BAT) for removing nitrogen. Only pre-qualified contractors are allowed to install and maintain/inspect these units.

### **What other requirements apply?**

The property owner is required to operate and maintain the BAT for the life of the system through a certified service provider. The owner shall ensure the BAT system is inspected and has necessary operation and maintenance performed at a minimum of once per year.

### **Are there things I should do to ensure my septic system is being properly used?**

Don't use garbage disposals or pour cooking grease, oils or other materials like paper towels, sanitary hygiene products, condoms, cigarettes or plastics into your septic system. These materials can overload your tank and end up clogging your disposal fields. Be careful with the amount of non-biodegradable chemicals used in your septic system like detergents, bleach, fabric softeners and paints. A septic system is a natural living environment, so you want to limit chemical use as much as possible. Practice water conservation by washing full loads of clothes, fixing leaky faucets and running toilets, and installing low-flow plumbing fixtures. Don't drain swimming pools or hot tubs into a septic system. The more water you pump through your system, the more stress you put on it. Septic tank additives have not been proven to be effective and are not recommended for use in septic systems. When landscaping, make sure plants and trees are compatible with your septic system. Roots can damage pipes and clog the drainfield. Grass is the best type of cover. These simple practices allow your system to operate at its best and can greatly extend the life of your septic system.

### **What must be done before a septic tank can be pumped?**

Septic tanks are constructed as single or double compartment tanks made of concrete, metal or plastic. Each compartment has a lid at the top to provide access for periodic pump-outs. Each lid typically is covered by 6 inches to 3 feet of soil material. The soil material covering each access lid must be removed by the owner before a septic tank pump-out can occur. **To prevent injury, the access lid(s) should only be removed by a licensed liquid waste hauler. A septic tank is a confined space and contains gases that can be deadly. Never climb into or enter a septic tank.**

### **How about pumpouts for BAT system?**

BAT owners should refer to their homeowner's guide and consult with their certified service provider to discuss the frequency for pump-outs in maintaining the BAT unit.

### **How often should I pump out my septic tank?**

By performing periodic septic tank pump-outs, you can save on costly repairs to your septic system. The frequency of septic tank pump-outs will depend on the current use of the system and the number of people living in the household. Septic tank pump-outs for residential use are recommended at least once every three years. For more information on the frequency of pump-outs, consult with a licensed liquid waste hauler or disposal system contractor.

### **How can I assure my hauler conducts a proper system pump-out?**

The best way to assure a proper system pump-out is to be there and watch how your septic tank is being pumped. A proper system pump-out includes removing the contents from each compartment of your septic tank and should only occur through the access lid of your septic tank.