

Septic tank guidelines

The Buller District Council (BDC) provides this information to properties that have a septic tank installed as property owners are, sometimes, not fully aware of the maintenance requirements and the responsibilities involved in operating a septic tank.

What type of septic tank do you have?

This is the most important issue to understand. There are many types of septic systems, but they are generally variations on a few common types:

Passive systems: Household wastewater flows into a tank. Solids settle to the bottom and fluids overflow, via gravity, to a distribution field or soak pit for ground soakage.

Active systems: Household wastewater flows into a tank. Solids settle to the bottom, fluids are filtered or screened into a secondary chamber before being pumped into the distribution field or soak pit.

Advanced systems: Household wastewater flows into a multi chamber tank. Solids settle to the bottom of the first chamber while fluids flow into an aeration or treatment chamber and are often filtered before being discharged to a pump chamber and pumped into the distribution field or soak pit.

All septic tanks require regular emptying

No matter what system you have, it will eventually fill up and require emptying. This is usually performed by a professional company. BDC recommends emptying septic systems at least once every three years. If your tank wasn't cleaned before you took ownership, it would be a good idea to get this work done now. There are a number of operators that service the Buller District and these can be found online.

Soak pits and drainage fields

Soak pits were typically used in older septic systems but are sometimes still used for new installs when the existing ground conditions are unsuitable for soakage. Soak pits and drainage fields can degrade if they become overwhelmed by water volumes or clog with sediment from ground runoff.

If your soak pit or drainage field is constantly wet or emits strong odours, it may require to be either dug out and re-stocked with soakage material or relocated.

Common problems and regular maintenance tasks

Septic systems generally work very well, and property owners should not have any issues if regular maintenance is undertaken. But if you notice any odours, or if your drainage field is noticeably wet – then these are signs there are problems.

Most modern systems have a filter or screen to prevent solids leaving the tank. These often clog and need regular (three-monthly) removal for cleaning. This usually involves hosing any collected material off the device. Check what system you have and how to access, remove and replace the filter or screen.

Ensure only your wastewater is going into the system. Check that your stormwater (from rooves, gutters etc.) is directed elsewhere, as this water will quickly overwhelm your drainage field and could lead to sewage overflows.

If your 'mushroom' or vent pipe is overflowing, either your tank is full, the drainage field outflow could be blocked, or the distribution pump or pipes have failed.

Odours may also be caused by the active bacteria in your tank being affected by chemicals. Septic tank bacteria are extremely sensitive to bleaches, pesticides, paint, medicines, cleaning wipes and antibacterial soaps, shampoo, detergents and cleaners. Use bio-degradable products and be vigilant about what is used, washed or flushed into your system.

Check the drainage pump is operating and clean your filters or screening devices regularly.

Your responsibilities

As a septic system owner, you have a duty of care to yourself, other residents, your neighbours and our wider district to operate your system responsibly.

A discharge of wastewater (an overflow of your tank or drainage field) can penetrate ground water or flow into streams and ditches – creating a wide spread nuisance or, worse, a serious health or environmental issue. BDC requires you to monitor, maintain and repair your system and report any overflows urgently.

If your system is reported as a nuisance, BDC will issue a notice to remedy the issue and there are penalties for non-compliance.

Questions or concerns?

There is a huge amount of information and plenty of instructional videos on the internet about septic system maintenance and operation. But if you can't find an answer, or need some assistance, please contact Buller District Council directly.

Phone: 03 788 9111

Website: www.bullerdc.govt.nz