



## IOWA CHAPTER

### Your Septic System Will Keep Iowa's Waters Clean

Septic systems are installed in homes and businesses that do not have access to municipal wastewater treatment plants. They generally are used in rural areas and rural housing developments. Septic systems need to be maintained in order to function properly. A malfunctioning septic tank can cause untreated sewage to enter Iowa's water bodies and can contaminate wells. Septic tanks can be polluting even though the owner is not aware of the problem.

When household waste is flushed or sent down a drain, it is collected in a container called a septic tank where the waste is treated. The process involves settling the solids and bacterial decomposition of the waste to form sludge. The sludge sits at the bottom of the tank. Scum, which consists of grease and oils, rises to the surface. Below the scum is the wastewater. A pipe carries wastewater from the septic tank into a drain field. The wastewater is then allowed to infiltrate into the soil, where microbes continue the decomposition process.

Iowa law requires that septic systems be inspected and repaired at the time a property is sold, but the septic tank still requires regular maintenance, including:

- A septic tank should be pumped out every 3 to 5 years. When too much sludge accumulates in the tank, wastewater is released from the tank into drain fields before the solids have settled. At the time it is pumped, the septic system will also be inspected. Repair any problems that are found. Don't wait for the septic system to fail to have it inspected and repaired.
- If standing water persists over the drain field, then the septic system needs to be inspected and perhaps repaired.
- Sewage backing into the house, sluggishly flushing toilets or smelly sewage odors inside the house or outdoors are signs that the septic system needs to be inspected and maintained.

A professional should be hired to pump the septic tank and to inspect it.

To keep a septic system working properly:

- Conserve water and fix leaky faucets and stools.
- Reduce the amount of water sent down the drain at any point by spacing out the use of the dishwasher, washing machine, shower or bathtub and other household uses throughout the day and week.
- Do not pour grease, lard and oils down the drain.
- Reduce or eliminate the use of the garbage disposal so solids will be reduced in the septic tank.
- Do not flush garbage down the stool; it will build up in the septic tank and may cause the tank to fail.
- Do not dump unused solvents, cleaning fluids, prescription medications or pesticides down the drain or stool.
- Do not drive over the septic tank and drain field, do not plant trees on the area and do not build a structure over the septic tank or drain field.



*Rock Creek, Mitchell County, Iowa. Photo credit: Ben Curtis*