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Onsite Septic Systems: Educating the Homeowner

“Out of sight, out of mind” is, unfortunately, a common theme among many homeowners with septic systems. Systems are tucked away underground, not to be thought about, until the system malfunctions or breaks down. This mindset is a major reason septic systems fail.

Lack of information is a common reason homeowners don't maintain their systems. “Historically, because of prescriptive codes (provincial and municipal regulations), people involved in the onsite sewage industry have always focused on design and installation and hoped systems performed as they're designed to,” said Ken Olson, part-time farmer and fulltime University of Minnesota onsite sewage treatment extension educator. “Everyone just forgot that once design and installation is done, the homeowner is in charge, but no one told the homeowner what to do.”

Misinformation is another reason homeowners don't maintain their systems. For example, many homeowners mistakenly believe that putting yeast or biological additives in their septic system is all they need to keep it functioning properly and avoid the need to have the solids pumped out of the septic tank. The state of Washington led in debunking this myth by proclaiming that most additives do not affect system operation positively and can contaminate groundwater aquifers. The Washington State Department of Health also placed restrictions on advertising claims by additive manufacturers.

Other homeowners have eagerly bought into various manufacturers' false claims that some onsite systems are maintenance free. What happened in Hamilton County, Ohio, in the early 1990s illustrates the problem. When aeration systems were installed there beginning in the 1950s, no one foresaw the overwhelming environmental and health price the community would later pay because it believed manufacturers who touted their systems as maintenance free and capable of producing effluent the quality of drinking water. It took updating household sewage regulations, instituting a comprehensive program to permit and annually inspect both new and existing systems, and a whole lot of public relations and public education to get the community's sewage problems under control.

Still other homeowners know that septic systems need to be maintained, but not how often. So they put it off, hoping to make it through yet another year without the added expense of inspecting the system and pumping the tank. Maintaining the septic system just doesn't have priority over the kids' braces or car repairs.

While uninformed homeowners might look with wide-eyed astonishment upon a nonmaintained septic system that failed, informed homeowners know that a nonmaintained system is certain to fail eventually. So what is the best way to inform the homeowner? One method that has consistently worked is education.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the goal for environmental education is to increase public awareness and knowledge about environmental issues and to provide the public with the skills needed to make informed decisions and take responsible actions. Environmental education enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective decision making skills. It also teaches individuals to weigh various sides of an environmental issue to make informed and responsible decisions. Environmental education does not advocate a particular viewpoint or course of action.

Informal education is most successful when the educator can tie the information being taught to the student's need for that information. For example, educators can explain how a failed septic system reduces property value. Homeowner testimonials can describe foul odors that permeate homes with failed septic systems. Statistical information can illustrate how a few hundred dollars spent maintaining a system can save a few thousand dollars needed to repair or replace it.

Educators can explain how failed septic systems can be a source of dysentery, hepatitis, jaundice, chemical or nutrient poison-



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ing, diarrhea, cramps, nausea, headaches, and even fatigue and that these diseases can affect an entire community. Educating homeowners is the surest way to create industry sustainability. Contractors must take the time to explain system operation and maintenance requirements and either offer maintenance service contracts to their clients or refer clients to a maintenance provider.

Educators can even explain how failed systems can devastate wildlife and their habitats and the adverse effects this can have on a community.

Homeowner Education

One of the goals of the Western Canada Onsite Wastewater Management Association is to educate the public about the value of recycling wastewater and the need for properly designed, installed and maintained onsite treatment systems.

WCOWMA includes information on their web site about the do's and don'ts of caring for septic systems. As well, the various provincial chapters offer ratepayer education meetings to interested municipal districts, counties and summer villages upon request..

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