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ANR Offers Advice for Homeowners with Failed Septic Systems

Homeowners must take steps to protect drinking supplies

Montpelier – Today the Agency of Natural Resources issued guidance to homeowners about the need to take action if they have reason to believe their septic system has failed.

“Vermont homeowners and businesses served by onsite wastewater disposal systems who see wastewater on the ground must take action,” said Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Deb Markowitz. “Improperly treated wastewater is a risk to human health, both through direct exposure and by entering and contaminating water supplies.”

“Many wastewater systems will properly function once the water recedes, while other systems will require repair or replacement," said Ernie Christianson, program manager for the Wastewater Management Division of the Department of Environmental Conservation. “Call our regional offices for help.”

The Wastewater Management Division has five regional offices that can provide assistance and answer questions about wastewater systems, water supplies and the permitting process. The new guidelines advise anyone who has an onsite sewage system to take the following actions if they find wastewater above ground:

1. Contact your town health officer. Your town office can provide you with the appropriate name and phone number.

2. Anyone who has a wastewater system that continues to have surfacing of household waste after the water recedes should take steps to prevent people and animals from entering the contaminated area.

3. As much as possible, take steps to prevent surfacing wastewater from flowing toward wells or off your property.

4. If you have a pump station as part of your household system, do not immediately pump the wastewater from the septic tank until it is known that the water table has dropped to an acceptable depth. An elevated groundwater table may cause an empty tank to collapse or shift in the ground.

5. Hydrated lime (also known as calcium hydroxide) may be applied to help disinfect the area. Lime is caustic so you must follow the instructions, wear rubber boots, gloves, goggles, and other protective clothing, and prevent people and animals from exposure.

6. Contact your ANR regional office and staff will assist you through the process of replacing the failed wastewater system and will provide information on how to obtain a permit if one is needed. Contact information can be found at http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/ww/staff.htm#regional

7. A licensed designer will need to design the wastewater system if the failed system needs reconstruction or replacing. Licensed designers who are professional engineers may be found in the phone book or on the Vermont Secretary of State website at: https://secure.vtprofessionals.org/roster/default.asp

Licensed designers who are not professional engineers are sorted by county at http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/ww/ST/SiteTechList.pdf

8. A guidance document about the general process for determining whether a wastewater system requires reconstruction or replacement may be found at:

http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/ww/protection/Guidance2011-Guidancefor%
20WWCollectionTreatment&DisposalSystemDamagedbyFlooding.pdf

Safe Drinking Water After the Flood

Private drinking wells that were subject to flooding should be tested for bacterial contamination. Contact your Health Department district office or town health officer for a free test kit and disinfection instructions. Until a test confirms that your water is safe, boil water for one minute before use in drinking, cooking, making juice or ice, washing fruits and vegetables and brushing teeth. This also applies to water that is dispensed by a refrigerator system. Shower with caution. Avoid getting water in eyes, mouth and wounds. Do not allow children to swallow bath water if on a boil-water notice.

Residents who get their drinking water from a public system should look for boil water or other instructions put out by their own system.

If there is a smell of petroleum or fuel, do not use water at all for cooking, bathing or washing. Use bottled water or water from a known safe source. Call the Health Department's drinking water program at 1-800-439-8550 for consultation and testing information.

For more information about drinking water safety and health concerns after a flood, go to the Health Department's website at http://healthvermont.gov/enviro/water/flood.aspx

For more information about flood clean up and mitigation and to download a copy of the new guidelines, visit the flood page on the ANR website at http://www.anr.state.vt.us/site/html/flood.htm

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