



## *Mississippi River - Grand Rapids Watershed Restoration & Protection Strategies*

### **Strategies for Water Quality Restoration Maintaining Healthy Septic Systems**

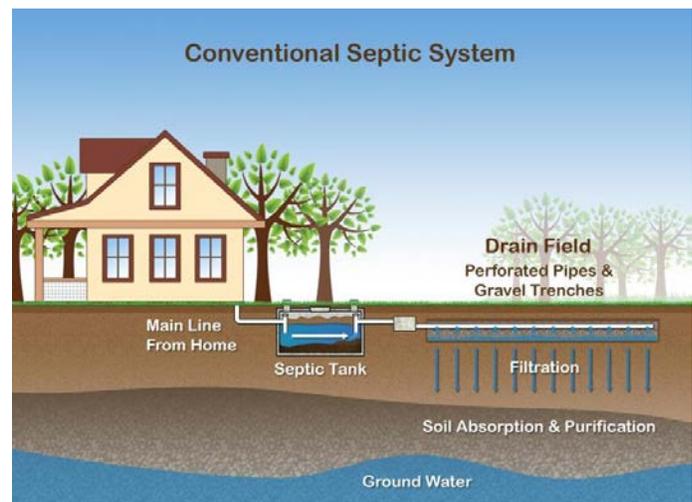
In much of the Upper Mississippi Grand Rapids Watershed, residents maintain their own septic systems. When maintained and functioning properly, they prevent nutrients and pathogens from coming into contact with ground water, lakes and streams. But a poorly functioning system can have a large impact on water quality, so keeping your septic system healthy is essential to keeping our water clean.

#### **How Does a Septic System Work?**

Septic systems have three parts:

- Plumbing connecting the house to the septic system
- The septic tank that collects liquid and solid wastes
- A drain field that uses soil filtration to treat the liquid waste

Raw sewage is delivered to the septic tank where naturally occurring bacteria start to decompose the waste. Liquid waste is delivered to the drain field where bacteria further destroys pathogens. Phosphorus present in the waste water attaches to soils particles, preventing them from passing into ground or surface waters.



#### **How Do I Know if My Septic is Working Properly?**

Just because waste water disappears when you flush, it doesn't guarantee that your system is working properly. Other signs that could mean you have a problem include:

- System septic alarm sounding
- Frozen pipes or drain field
- Sewage odors indoors or out
- Water or sewage in the yard or ditch
- High levels of nitrates or bacteria in well water tests

## What Keeps a Septic System Healthy?

A well-maintained system will have a longer lifespan and keep pathogens and pollutants out of our water. To ensure your system keeps working the way it should, all three major components must be maintained.

### Plumbing

- Control water use by repairing leaky faucets, install low water fixtures, only wash full loads of laundry and spread water use throughout the day.
- Avoid harsh cleaners, antibacterial soaps, detergents and bleach. Bacteria are an important part of the sewage treatment process, so we want to keep them happy and healthy!
- Only dispose of sewage and toilet paper in your septic system. Keep out paints, medications or chemicals, excessive grease, lint, food, feminine hygiene products and flushable wipes.

### Septic Tank

- Have your septic tank pumped at a minimum of every three years. Larger households may require more frequent pumping. Always use a licensed professional.
- Be sure all solids are removed. The complete removal of solids requires flushing and back flushing between the tank and truck several times.
- Have baffles inspected when the tank is pumped.
- Make sure the tank and inspection pipes are accessible.

### Drain Field

- Maintain grass or native plants over the drain field. The area should be mowed but not fertilized, watered or burned.
- Do not plant trees, shrubs or deep-rooted plants in the treatment area. In addition, this is not the place for your vegetable garden.
- Keep heavy vehicles off the drain field. Do not build any structures over this area.

For more information. Please contact one of the Soil and Water Conservation Districts partnering on this project.

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