

The Florida Agricultural Handbook of Solid and Hazardous Waste Regulation: Sewage Disposal Systems¹

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May I have an on-site sewage disposal system?

The state does not encourage the use of on-site sewage disposal systems (which generally take the form of septic tanks and drain fields). Both the statutes and the Florida Department of Health (DOH) rules require the use of public or investor-owned sewage systems in areas where they are available.

Unless your system is being used to dispose entirely of graywater, it must be connected to a public sewage system within one year from the date such a public system becomes available in your area.

Graywater is defined as residential wastewater from bathroom or lavatory sinks and washing machines.

Blackwater is defined as all other residential wastewater, like water from toilets and kitchen drains.

Who regulates on-site sewage disposal?

While the Florida Statutes contain a set of broad guidelines regulating sewage disposal, the Department of Health (DOH) and the Bureau of Onsite Sewage are the primary authorities for specific, statewide regulations controlling the installation and use of on-site sewage disposal systems.

Who is regulated under DEP waste disposal rules?

The waste disposal rules of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) apply to you if

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- the volume of water to be processed exceeds 5,000 gallons per day;
- the water contains industrial or hazardous waste;
- the system is located in an area that is zoned for industry or manufacturing.

If your system falls into one of these categories, you should contact DEP because they will require a separate permit and impose further restrictions on the system. In addition to the statewide rules, local governments will typically have their own rules and requirements for permitting and regulating the disposal system.

Do on-site sewage disposal systems need to be placed in specific places?

Florida law requires that an onsite sewage system be at least

- 75 feet away from any private potable wells;
- 50 feet away from any non-potable wells;
- 10 feet away from any storm sewer pipe;
- 5 feet away from any buildings or property lines;
- 75 feet away from any surface water bodies;

Additionally, Florida law requires that

- if an on-site sewage system processes more than 2,000 gallons per day, then it must be at least 200 feet away from any public drinking well;
- if an on-site sewage system processes less than 2,000 gallons per day, then it must be at least 100 feet away from any public drinking well.

What permits do I need for on-site sewage disposal systems?

The DOH requires a permit for the installation, repair, and abandonment of all on-site sewage systems. Prior to the issuance of a permit, DOH may inspect the site and perform any necessary tests to

determine whether the system has any potential to cause harm.

Do I need local permits for on-site sewage disposal systems?

Local governments will often require separate permits (like plumbing permits) and impose separate requirements for the installation, repair, and abandonment of disposal systems. In many cases, the issuance of these permits will be contingent upon the applicant having already obtained a DOH permit. Dependent upon how you are zoned, you may also be required to get an operating permit, or renewal of an operating permit.

What are the costs for on-site sewage disposal system permits?

A fee will be collected for the permit, the inspections, and any other necessary services performed by DOH or local authorities. Fees vary depending upon locality and the extent of the system.

What should I do to maintain an on-site sewage disposal system?

The owner of the property is responsible for maintenance and upkeep of the system. Under DOH rules, you should check the level of the tank at least once every three to five years. Both the statute and the rules prohibit the use of organic chemical solvents to degrease or unclog the system. Pumping out the system requires a permit from the DOH, which will require proof that the proper pump, truck, and expertise will be used.

What if I abandon an on-site sewage disposal system?

Follow these steps to abandon an on-site sewage system (septic tank):

1. Property owner must pay a fee and obtain a permit from DOH
2. Tank should be pumped out

3. Tank-bottom should be opened, ruptured, or entirely collapsed to prevent water retention
4. Tank should be filled with clean sand or similar material

A property owner who seeks to abandon a septic tank is not required to obtain a permit from DOH if a local utility or plumbing authority performs a system abandonment program. However, the tank must be DOH-inspected if such authority does not perform an abandonment program.

Are there alternatives to an on-site sewage disposal system?

The rules give the individual county public health departments the authority to approve alternative onsite systems such as mounds, gravity sewers, low-pressure pipe, and other systems, so long as the county feels there will be no adverse effects. The DOH retains authority to approve the use of temporary measures, like portable toilets, as well.

How can I be excused from complying with these regulations?

The DOH rules also create a statewide board that hears requests for variances. The board has the power to excuse compliance from the rules where it finds compliance would be an undue burden on the applicant.

How can I prevent nonpoint source pollution from being generated by my agricultural activities?

Nonpoint source pollution is the greatest cause of water quality problems. DEP has a Nonpoint Source Management Program in place to offer assistance to prevent nonpoint source pollution from agricultural activities (see [FE786](#), Contact Agencies).