

THE YEAR OF THE SEPTIC SYSTEM Researched by Pat Gripp

The following excerpts are from a document entitled "The Foca Environment Committee Presents The Year of the Septic System," by Mandy Wilkins, Chair, and Sally Gillis, FOCA Director, 2003.

"AN OVERVIEW OF HOW SEPTIC SYSTEMS FUNCTION

The purpose of a septic system is to effectively accept and treat liquid wastes from your home, and to prevent biological and nutrient contaminants from polluting water supplies and waterbodies. Most of this treatment happens in the soil below the absorption field. The physical and chemical properties of the soils combine with microscopic organisms to decompose or prevent movement of contaminants.

In soil not saturated with water, biological contaminants (bacteria and viruses) are usually absorbed and rendered inactive within a few feet of the absorption field. Some nutrients, on the other hand, can travel much greater distances, depending on the type of soil, the amount of concentration of waste and the age of the system. Loam and clay soils, for example, have a greater long-term ability to absorb nutrients and prevent them from moving through the soil than do sand and muck soils. In their journey nutrients or biological contaminants that encounter soil saturated with water can move much greater distances; in some instances, as much as several hundred feet."

SHORELINE SEPTIC SYSTEMS ARE A SPECIAL CLASS

Because septic systems on shoreline property are often close to the water and are sometimes saturated during high water periods, they are very likely to leak wastes to lakes and streams [and rivers]. Also, when shorelines erode, the distance between the septic system and the shoreline gets shorter and shorter, making it more likely that liquid waste could move horizontally through the soil to the bank and then quickly over the surface to the water. This pollution can happen though your system appears to be working well and complies with local health department codes.

The effects of septic system wastes on lakes and streams are well documented. Nutrients (especially phosphorus) from leaky septic systems play a major role in causing excessive weed and algae growth in lakes and ponds."

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Let your municipal councilors [representatives] know that, due to the changing nature of shorelines and water bodies, septic systems near water require special attention. Inspection at the time of installation only is not enough; lobby for a septic re-inspection program to insure that the systems around your lake [river] are being regularly maintained.
2. Take extra-special care of your own system by pumping regularly and often, at least every two to five years. Some sources even recommend pumping every year.
3. Conserve water in you home; the smaller the amount of water that enters your septic system, the less the likelihood of liquid wastes reaching lakes or ponds [or rivers].
4. Plant trees and shrubs between your absorption field and the shoreline; these will help intercept and absorb some of the nutrients before they reach the shore line.
5. If you installed your septic system for a summer cottage and are now using it for a longer period or year round, consider replacing it. It is probably undersized.
6. If you are engaged in new construction place the septic system as far away from the shoreline as possible. This distance should be even farther than building codes require....Also, design the system so that it will accommodate increased future use, in order to avoid costly replacement later on.

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