

Onsite Wastewater Treatment Program

ONSITE WASTEWATER TREATMENT SYSTEM INSPECTIONS VERSUS EVALUATIONS



Onsite wastewater treatment systems treat wastewater from about 25 percent of the homes in Missouri. Wastewater is treated and recycled usually on the property where it is produced by onsite systems rather than by a central sewer collection and treatment system. At the time of a property sale, a homebuyer or lender may want to know about the condition of an onsite wastewater treatment system. If a system has an improper discharge or the soil treatment system fails, untreated or under-treated wastewater might be exposed on the ground surface. Surfacing wastewater or a contaminated water supply could be a health hazard for the home's occupants or neighbors, and if repairs are needed for a failed or inadequate system, they can be costly.

Two types of onsite wastewater treatment systems are commonly used to treat residential wastewater in Missouri. They are sewage tanks with soil treatment systems or lagoons.

Soil treatment systems follow a wastewater pre-treatment component such as a septic tank or aerated treatment unit (ATU). Final treatment and dispersal is through lateral trenches in the soil. In septic tank systems, most of the wastewater treatment is provided by the soil. Soil or space limitations sometimes make it necessary to use an ATU or a more advanced pretreatment system. These systems include components such as filters, pumps, electric controls, distribution valves and media-filters. If an onsite system is properly sized, located, installed, [operated and maintained](#), it can adequately treat wastewater indefinitely.

Lagoons are above ground pond-like structures that are used to treat wastewater from a single-family residence. Air, sunlight and long retention time aid in this method of wastewater treatment. Any overflow from a lagoon must soak into the soil, staying on the property where the lagoon is located.

It is difficult for the property owner, buyer, or lender to know the condition of an existing onsite system, since most components are underground. For the most part, local public health agencies no longer inspect existing systems related to real estate transfer. The help of a [licensed inspector](#) can be obtained to check the condition of the system. Individuals are licensed by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services to perform private assessments of existing onsite systems for real estate transactions. There are two distinct types of assessments performed by these licensed individuals: inspections and evaluations.

An **inspection** provides a thorough assessment of the condition of an onsite wastewater treatment system and all components. In addition, a Hydraulic Test is conducted to determine whether a soil treatment system can accept normal anticipated wastewater flows. An **evaluation** reports on the functionality of the tank component(s), observable condition of the soil treatment system and any signs of past or present system failures. A Hydraulic Test is not performed during this type of assessment. Therefore the soil treatment area is not tested. A report showing the results of either assessment is provided to the person who requested it. Copies are also provided to Department of Health and Senior Services Onsite Wastewater Treatment Program staff and the local onsite wastewater agency. See [Training Manual for Private Inspection/Evaluation Assessment](#) for more detail regarding inspection and evaluation protocols.

The table below will help you determine whether you need an inspection or an evaluation. When applying for a home loan, check with the lender to determine which type of assessment is required, if any.

When you have received an onsite system assessment report, it is important to understand what it means. An assessment report might alert the property owner, buyer or lender to critical items or potential deficiencies with the onsite system.

If there are deficiencies, the parties involved in a real estate transaction must decide what system repairs will be made. State regulations do not require systems that existed prior to 1996 to comply with current standards as a result of an inspection/evaluation. However, in some cases, local standards are more stringent than the state regulation.

Some deficiencies noted on an assessment report are an indication that the system has failed in the past or could potentially fail soon. Failing onsite systems can be a health hazard for the family or guests in the home and others in the neighborhood. Also, if the local authority receives a complaint about a system that is creating a nuisance, the property owner may be required to make repairs. Examples of nuisances are wastewater from a soil treatment system on top of the ground, or wastewater draining onto someone else's property, or into a stream or lake.

Other reported deficiencies could indicate that components of the onsite wastewater treatment system do not meet current standards or that routine maintenance has been neglected.

For some of these systems, proper maintenance and system management could extend the potential useful life of the system.

Comparison of Inspections and Evaluations

Description	Inspection	Evaluation
1. Can be performed by a private licensed inspector	X	X
2. Reports on the system's condition the day of the assessment	X	X
3. Reports on evidence of system failure, current or past	X	X
4. Reports on potential soil limitations for treatment systems or lagoons, using published soil surveys		X
5. Must have access to all sewage tank components	X	X
6. Checks the size and condition of tanks	X	X
7. Checks function of all tanks, pretreatment components, mechanical components, and controls	X	X
8. Provides water volume test of soil treatment systems	X	
9. May include dye test	X	X
10. Provides assessment of private water supply if one is present	X	X
11. Provides report on results of assessment to property owner, buyer or requesting	X	X

Both inspections and evaluations provide an assessment of the water supply if it is from a private source. A water sample that shows bacterial contamination is reason for concern whether the contamination is from an onsite system or not. An inspector /evaluator can resample the water after the water system has been disinfected. Two good samples, at least one week apart, after chorine has been flushed from the system would show that the system is safe, but regular sampling is recommended. Additional bad samples can be further investigated with the assistance of a licensed well driller or experienced plumber.

If onsite wastewater treatment system repair is planned, contact the local administrative authority regarding permit application requirements before any construction or major repair. The installation must comply with current standards.

