

After the Fire: Septic Systems Frequently Asked Questions



State of Oregon
Department of
Environmental
Quality

Onsite Program
165 E Seventh Ave.,
Suite 100
Eugene, OR 97401
Phone: 541-687-7338
Contact: Randy Trox
randall.trox@state.or.us
www.oregon.gov/DEQ

*DEQ is a leader in
restoring, maintaining
and enhancing the
quality of Oregon's air,
land and water.*

If my house was not destroyed or damaged by wildfire, do I need to have my septic inspected prior to returning?

No. You should be mindful of slow draining plumbing fixtures or wet spots in the yard in the absorption field and be aware that system components such as septic tanks, lids, control panels above ground or even below ground may be damaged. Contact a licensed sewage disposal service if you encounter these situations.

If I'm going to rebuild or replace my home, do I need to have my septic system inspected?

Yes, if you intend on reconnecting to the existing septic system. Try to avoid disturbing any existing septic system components, especially the drainfield area during demolition activities. After the debris removal has been completed, and before the building permit for the residence can be issued, you'll need to apply the [local DEQ office or contract county](#) to apply for an [Authorization Notice](#) to have the system inspected. If repairs are necessary, installation of new septic tanks and absorption fields cannot be permitted until after the debris removal is completed.

If my house is standing, but there's damage to the septic system, do I need a permit to make repairs?

Yes. You will need to secure a repair permit from the [local DEQ office or contract county](#). A licensed and certified [sewage disposal service](#) must do the work, although a property owner or the property owner's employee may install their own system. A contractor is recommended to install a septic system, unless the property owner has excavation skills.

If I don't rebuild and want to sell my lot, do I need to have my septic inspected?

No. Septic systems on properties where the homes were destroyed or damaged by wildfire will not need to be inspected prior to transferring title. However, it is advisable to have an Existing System Evaluation Report completed to ensure any issues are identified. There are [requirements](#) on who can do these evaluations and the [DEQ form](#) must be used.

Can I get a copy of a map showing the location of my septic system?

Yes. [Septic system records are online](#) only for counties where DEQ provides direct service for the onsite program. For counties operated by local agencies, records management varies as to whether records are online or paper only. Contact the [local agency](#) or check their website for information.

If I'm rebuilding in a new location on the property, will I still be able to use the existing septic system?

It depends. The key factor is if you have enough fall, or difference in elevation, from the proposed structure site to the septic tank. You may need a minor alteration permit to install a new tank, possibly with a pump. There may be other challenges, such as a creek, ravine or road between the proposed structure and the existing septic system.

If the fire damaged my septic tank, do I have to replace the whole septic system?

No. Only that portion of the septic system that was damaged must be replaced. Typically, a septic system is comprised of a septic tank and a drainfield. The work must be performed under a permit issued by the local DEQ office or contract county when a septic tank or other portion of the system is replaced.

If the top of the septic tank is damaged, can I repair it?

No. If the top of a septic tank is damaged, typically the inside of the tank is exposed. This poses a safety hazard for people and wildlife for falling into the tank. It also exposes people to the unhealthy wastewater inside. A septic tank that has undergone this kind of damage must be pumped out and filled with sand or gravel or removed. The tank cannot be repaired because the structural integrity of the tank has been compromised.

More information

- DEQ's septic system program: ordeq.org/septic
- How to safely manage ash and debris from burned buildings: ordeq.org/afterthefire
- Oregon wildfire recovery resources: wildfire.oregon.gov

Alternative formats

DEQ can provide documents in an alternate format or in a language other than English upon request. Call DEQ at 800-452-4011 or email deqinfo@deq.state.or.us.