

# The Florida Handbook of Solid and Hazardous Waste Regulation: Sewage Disposal Systems<sup>1</sup>

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## May I have an on-site sewage disposal system?

The state of Florida 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 (FDOH) 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, such as 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, FDOH's Bureau of Onsite Sewage and the environmental health section of the county health departments are the primary authorities for specific, statewide regulations controlling the installation and use of on-site sewage disposal systems.

## Who is regulated under FDEP waste disposal rules?

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

- the volume of domestic wastewater to be processed exceeds 10,000 gallons per day (domestic wastewater includes waste from homes, portable toilets, boats and marinas, and certain commercial and industrial establishments)

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- the volume of commercial wastewater to be processed exceeds 5,000 gallons per day (commercial wastewater includes waste from restaurants, commercial kennels and veterinary hospitals, and beauty salons)
- 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 FDEP because they will require a separate permit and impose further restrictions on the system. (<https://floridadep.gov/water/industrial-wastewater>). 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 on-site 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?

FDOH requires a permit for the installation, repair, and abandonment of all on-site sewage systems. Before it issues a permit, FDOH may inspect the site and perform any necessary tests to determine whether the system has any potential to cause harm. Permit information and applications are available online at <https://floridadep.gov/water/onsite-sewage/content/onsite-sewage-faq-permitting>.

## 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 on the applicant having already obtained a FDOH permit. Dependent on 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 FDOH or local authorities. Fees vary depending on 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 the maintenance and upkeep of the system. Under FDOH rules, you should check the sewage level in the tank at least once every five years. FDOH maintains a list of criteria for acceptable products that may be used to maintain, degrease, or unclog the system. Pumping out the system requires a permit from FDOH, 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 four steps to abandon an on-site sewage system (septic tank):

1. Pay the fee and obtain a permit from FDOH
2. Have the tank pumped out by a permitted septage disposal company
3. Open, rupture, or entirely collapse the tank bottom to prevent water retention
4. Fill the tank with clean sand or similar material and completely cover it with soil

A property owner who seeks to abandon a septic tank is not required to obtain a permit from FDOH if a local utility or plumbing authority performs a system abandonment

program. However, the tank must be FDOH-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 on-site systems, such as mounds, gravity sewers, low-pressure pipe, and other systems, so long as the county feels there will be no adverse effects. FDOH 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 FDOH 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. FDEP has a Nonpoint Source Management Program in place to offer assistance to prevent nonpoint source pollution from agricultural activities (see <https://floridadep.gov/water>; FE786, Contact Agencies). Additionally, FDACS has published annual updates on the status of the implementation of the best management practices for agricultural nonpoint source pollution management (see <https://www.fdacs.gov/Divisions-Offices/Agricultural-Water-Policy>).

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