

Frequently Asked Questions About Septic System Maintenance Inspections

1. What is a Septic System Maintenance Inspection Program?

A septic system maintenance inspection program is a formal assessment of the safety of privately owned wastewater treatment systems. It is intended to protect our communal water resources, public health and the environment by making sure that the septic systems in our community are being safely operated and maintained.

2. Why is my septic system being inspected?

All properties with septic systems located within highly vulnerable municipal well head protection areas or intake protection zones are required to have their septic systems inspected **every five years**.

Your system is being inspected because your property is within the designated highly vulnerable area for your local municipal water supply well. Since it is in this highly vulnerable area, it has a greater chance of affecting the water supply well if it is not functioning properly.

This is an Ontario Provincial government requirement that is being delivered by your municipality to protect municipal water supplies. Only those septic systems identified by the Clean Water Act and the Source Water Protection Authorities (local Conservation Authorities) as 'significant drinking water threats' comprise the scope of septic systems to be inspected. These are mandatory inspections under the Ontario Building Code, the Clean Water Act and the watershed based Source Protection Plan. The municipality is required to complete inspections by 2017.

3. What are the highly vulnerable areas where septic system inspections are mandatory?

The highly vulnerable areas include well head protection areas or intake protection zones with a groundwater vulnerability score of 10 (red areas on maps) and an 'issues contributing area' for nitrates or pathogens. An 'issues contributing area' is a well head protection area for a well that has contaminant already present in the municipal well (ie nitrate)

For questions regarding Source Water Protection and the related science, contact the Wellington Source Water Protection Risk Management Official – Kyle Davis at 519-846-9691 ext 362 or 1-844-383-9800

4. Will I be penalized for having an "old" but working system?

No. The standard for the program isn't related to age. We are only trying to identify systems that pose a public health or environmental risk. An old system that is functioning properly is considered a safe system.

The inspection process is to determine compliance with Section 8.9 of the Ontario Building Code. This section does not require that construction methods meet today's standards, however the system must be maintained properly and be operating in a safe manner.

5. Will I be forced to install a very expensive system if my current system "fails"?

Under the Ontario Building Code, an owner is required to have an operating septic system. The cost of the repair or replacement will depend on a number of factors, including the extent of the failure, the type of soil on your property, the size of the building it services and the space available for a new system.

6. Is there a cost to the inspection? Who do I pay?

Erin, Puslinch, Minto, Wellington North, Mapleton, Centre Wellington

If your maintenance inspection is booked and conducted in the 2015 or 2016 inspection seasons, the cost of the inspection will be covered by provincial funding. It is our goal to complete all the inspections by the end of 2016, but scheduling will depend on the owner's availability.

Guelph / Eramosa

Due to the number of inspections required in Guelph / Eramosa Township, the provincial funding available will cover about half of each inspection cost in 2015/16. As this is an ongoing program and to minimize the immediate financial impact on property owners, those properties requiring inspections will see a \$50 to \$60 special levy on their property taxes beginning in 2016.

7. Are all systems being inspected?

No. Only those properties within designated highly vulnerable areas (Question 3) will be inspected since if they malfunction, they have the greatest chance of compromising the water quality of a nearby municipal well.

8. How do I schedule an inspection?

Erin, Puslinch, Guelph / Eramosa, Wellington North, Centre Wellington

Once residents have received their information package (from WSP) in the mail, please call WSP Canada at 1-800-263-7419 or 1-905-750-3080. The Scheduling Assistants can be reached at extension 16334 or 16343. The information packages were mailed in June 2016.

Minto, Mapleton

If you have not yet received a letter from Wellington Source Water Protection and your municipality, wait until you receive a letter and your local building department will provide further details on how to schedule an inspection.

9. Do I have to do anything to prepare for the inspection?

Yes, you will be asked to locate and expose both access lids for your septic tank prior to the inspection. Exposing both lids allows our inspector to see both the inlet and the outlet of the tank.

The sewage hauler normally pumps from the first chamber lid (as this is the chamber that the sludge settles in). However the second chamber allows us to see the liquid level in the tank versus the elevation of the outlet pipe (and thus whether a tank is backing up, or if it is leaking).

Residents do not need to uncover the entire top of the tank.

10. Do I have to be present for the inspection?

Yes, you do or someone over the age of 18 that can act on your behalf. This will also help you to understand how your system is operating.

11. How long will the inspection take?

The inspection will take about 30 to 60 minutes if the tank is exposed.

12. Who will complete the inspection?

Depending on your municipality, it will either be municipal Building Department Officials or a consultant hired to complete the inspections. The consultant is WSP Canada and they will be completing inspections in Erin, Guelph / Eramosa, Puslinch, Wellington North and Centre Wellington. All other Wellington County municipalities, currently, will be inspecting the septic systems with municipal staff.

A consultant was hired due to the numbers of septic systems requiring mandatory inspection in Erin, Guelph / Eramosa, Puslinch, Centre Wellington and Wellington North (approximately 640 properties County wide).

13. Why can't my septic tank pump out or maintenance contractor complete the mandatory, five year inspection?

To ensure that the inspection is fair and impartial, it is important that the person conducting it is not in a position to benefit from requesting any repairs.

The Ontario Building Code Compendium (2012) Section 1.10 does not allow the maintenance inspector to benefit (professionally or financially) from the septic system being inspected (ie tank pump outs, redesign, repairs). Therefore, a third party (either municipal staff or consultant) must conduct the mandatory five year inspection under the *Ontario Building Code*.

14. What sorts of things will the inspectors be looking for? What is the criteria for a pass?

We will be looking for signs that the system is unsafe. This includes things like excessive solids in the septic tank, signs of a leaking septic tank, and signs of failure of the leaching bed, such as water ponding on the surface, or soft ground on or near the bed.

The inspection process is to determine compliance with Section 8.9 of the Ontario Building Code. This section does not require that construction methods meet today's standards, however the system must be maintained properly and be operating in a safe manner.

15. Is a copy of the inspection form available on the internet?

Yes, a copy of the inspection form being used by WSP Canada Inc. is provided on our website: www.wellingtonwater.ca

If WSP Canada Inc. is not conducting inspections in your municipality, please contact your local Building Department for more details on the inspection form.

16. If a resident just had their septic tank pumped out, do they have to dig it up again for inspection?

Yes, the only way that the inspectors can determine proper operation and maintenance of the system will be to have both lids of the septic tank exposed so that we can access it.

An assessment of the septic system cannot take place without looking into the septic tank access hatches. If our consultant cannot perform the required assessment of a septic system, your property will be out of compliance with the Mandatory Maintenance Inspection Program.

The inspection is a hybrid Phase I and II septic maintenance inspection as defined by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and based on their guidance. This guidance is used to determine the condition of the septic tank. The best method to do this, is to inspect the tank via the access ports.

17. Should I pump out my tank before the inspection?

No, pumping out the tank before your inspection is not required. If you wish to pump out your tank before the inspection, please ensure it is done at least fourteen (14) days before your inspection date.

18. How long should we go between septic tank pump outs?

It depends on the number of people in the household, size of the house and the size of the septic tank.

19. What if I can't dig up the access ports for my septic tank?

Both access port lids need to be accessible for the inspection to be performed. If you are unable to dig up the access port, there are a number of private contractors who would be able to provide you the service for a fee. You may wish to contract a septic maintenance contractor to dig up both access ports and install access risers on your tank for easier access in the future.

Your family, friends or neighbours may also be able to help.

We are not able to provide a listing of contractors as we would not be able to maintain a complete list and do not wish to provide preferential treatment to certain contractors. We suggest you consult your local yellow pages for a listing of private contractors in your area.

Both access ports need to be uncovered. This is because the inspector needs to see both chambers in your tank and to take a sludge level measurement in the first chamber. Viewing both chambers allows our inspector to see both the inlet and the outlet of the tank and to determine whether the tank is functioning properly.

20. What if I don't know where my system is?

We will try to help you find it, but looking at your records or asking local pumpers can help. Our municipal Building Department may also have records, so please contact them.

21. Will you be digging any holes in my leaching bed?

No, we will only be conducting a visual inspection of the leaching bed. The only excavations will be those required to expose the top of the septic tank.

22. Will you be inspecting anything else on my property?

No, we will not be looking at anything other than the components of the septic system during this inspection.

23. Will the inspector need to enter my house?

No, the inspector will not need to enter your house.

24. Do I need to provide any maintenance records?

If you have them, yes. You may be asked to provide maintenance records if you have a holding tank, or if you have an advanced treatment unit other than a basic septic tank.

25. Will you be testing my water?

No. But you may want to do this on your own if you have your own well, as it is a good practice and your local health unit will do it for free. Sample bottles can be picked up at

your local health unit office and many municipal offices including Guelph / Eramosa, Puslinch, Erin and Wellington North.

26. If my system has any deficiencies, how will I be notified?

You will be informally advised by the inspector on site with a formal, follow-up letter from the inspection consultant / municipality.

27. How much time will I be given to have any deficiencies addressed?

Remediation times will vary on the complexity of the deficiency. But in all cases practicality will be applied to any timelines given for repairs.

28. What is the best system to install if I need to replace my system?

There is no “best system” out there. Every site is unique and the “best system” is likely different for each. Fortunately, the Ontario Building Code provides a range of solutions and technologies to serve a variety of homeowners.

29. Will the inspection program ever be expanded to other properties?

Expansion of the program to the rest of the municipality would be considered a discretionary program under the Ontario Building Code and would be a decision of Council.

30. I have a tertiary system and the tertiary system manufacturer regularly inspects my system through a maintenance agreement? I pay for the maintenance agreement inspection, why do I need to have this inspection?

Our inspection will only inspect the septic tank and leaching bed, not the tertiary treatment unit itself. Typically, the manufacturer’s maintenance agreement inspection focuses on the tertiary treatment unit only.

The mandatory five year inspection will focus on signs that the system is unsafe. This includes things like excessive solids in the septic tank, signs of a leaking septic tank, and signs of failure of the leaching bed, such as water ponding on the surface, or soft ground on or near the bed.

The Ontario Building Code Compendium (2012) Section 1.10 does not allow the maintenance inspector to benefit (professionally or financially) from the septic system being inspected (ie tank pump outs, redesign, repairs). Therefore, a third party (either

municipal staff or consultant) must conduct the mandatory five year inspection under the *Ontario Building Code*.

31. Will there be any funding available to help me pay for repairs or a replacement system?

Credit Valley offers a program that may apply to properties in the Town of Erin.

<http://www.creditvalleyca.ca/your-land-water/countryside-stewardship/rural-non-farm-stewardship/>

More information can be found at:

Wellington Source Water Protection: www.wellingtonwater.ca

Septic Smart: http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/environment/facts/sep_smart.htm