



Winter Septic Tank Pumping

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In general, cleaning of septic tanks is not recommended in cold climates during the winter months. Winter's arrival can vary year to year, but a good rule of thumb in Minnesota is to avoid pumping from November – April. Below are the most common problems associated with winter pumping.

1. Depending on the size of the family living in the home it could take days or even weeks for the septic tank(s) to fill back up. The typical person uses approximately 60 gallons per day. If two people were living in a home it would take eight days for the tank to be full. During these eight days no wastewater would be traveling out through your septic tank and out to the soil treatment system. This could result in your septic soil treatment area freezing and your septic tank requiring pumping out for the rest of winter.
2. Often the lids on septic tanks are buried. Once frost gets into the soil it is very difficult to dig down to the lid. On a side note, it is recommended that these lids be extended to grade to facilitate pumping. Septic tanks can only be properly maintained by accessing the lid. Newer septic tanks have maintenance lids to grade that are insulated. Shallow tanks are insulated too as shown in the picture at right.
3. If the Maintainer who cleans your septic tank typically land applies the septage versus taking it to a wastewater treatment plant, it may be more challenging or not allowed if the soil is frozen.
4. There are bacteria in your septic tank that work to breakdown the wastewater. It takes time to get the bacteria up to full speed after a tank pumping. This will happen more rapidly under warmer conditions. In addition, they do not work as well when they are cold which is more likely after pumping.



Septic tank with insulation

Exceptions

Although winter pumping is not generally recommended there are few times it may be the correct course of action discussed below.

1. There is an emergency related to the septic system that involves sewage backing-up into your home, sewage coming to the surface in your yard, or your septic pump needs replacement.
2. If you have a cabin or home that will have limited use during the winter, the septic tank can be pumped and then gradually filled over the winter with no wastewater leaving the septic tank. If the tank is located in an area with a high water table, tank buoyancy should be evaluated prior to pumping the tank. If a septic tank is left full with low uses over the winter months, the sewage will get very cold, and can even freeze.

For more information about septic systems including methods to prevent systems from freezing, please visit our [website](#) or reach us by email at septic@umn.edu