

Protecting our people Protecting our homes Protecting our natural areas

Time of Sale or Transfer (TOST) Program

What is TOST?

In Barry and Eaton counties, there is a program which requires that private on-site water supplies (wells) and on-site septic (sewage) systems be evaluated to make sure they are functioning adequately and safely before a sale or transfer of a property can occur. This is called the Time of Sale or Transfer (TOST) Program and is part of the *Regulations Governing On-site Sewage and On-site Water Supply System Evaluation and Maintenance in Barry and Eaton County, Michigan*.

Getting safe water...and treating waste

In rural areas, often it's not practical to have city water supply or city sewers because homes are located far apart and many miles from municipal facilities. Rural homes typically have a private well for their water supply and their own septic system to manage household waste. These are known as **on-site water supplies** (wells) and **on-site septic systems** (sewage systems).

Getting safe water



Why should we check water wells?

When a water well does not function properly—if it is faulty or poorly constructed—water available in the home may be unsafe. Faulty on-site water systems have the potential to become contaminated without warning.

What can go wrong with a home water supply?

If a well is drawing water from a contaminated source underground, the water may have bacteria, chemicals, or other contaminants that can cause ill health. More commonly, a contaminated water supply comes from insects or other debris that have entered a compromised well. Occasionally a malfunctioning septic system can also contaminate the owner's own water supply.

Who can be affected?

Water quality problems in drinking water particularly affect our most vulnerable residents, including children, the elderly, those who have chronic diseases, and those who have immune problems, such as cancer patients. These people often take the longest to recover from a water-borne illness. Such illnesses can be life threatening for these residents.

Because of the TOST regulation, both the home seller and buyer are aware of any water quality problems or issues before closing. The water is typically sampled and tested for coliform bacteria, *E. coli*, and nitrates. Sometimes, it's only after repairs to a well that people living in the home notice that they no longer suffer from recurrent bouts of diarrhea or other stomach problems.

Why do evaluations?

A well may not have been installed with the proper safeguards in place to protect it from contamination. Potential sources of contamination include an on-site septic system or a buried fuel oil tank. It may have been installed with outdated techniques or practices. Sometimes, improper indoor plumbing can result in *cross connections*, which means that waste water may be able to contaminate water meant for drinking.

How do wells get contaminated?

TOST evaluations often find wells that were accidentally damaged. The well head, which is above ground, can easily be hit or run over. Riding lawn mowers are a frequent culprit, as are vehicles and snowplows. It's important that the well head is intact and free of damage to protect from ground-level contamination. Damaged or loose well caps, screens, or electrical conduits can allow for openings into the well that insects will enter, and insect debris can cause bacteria to contaminate the water supply.

What about old, unused wells on my property?

Abandoned wells are another source of potential contamination of groundwater. An unplugged abandoned well is a direct connection from potentially harmful human activities at the ground surface and the groundwater below. Abandoned wells must be "plugged" by a registered well driller and are then no longer a threat to the groundwater.



Treating our waste

Why should we check home sewage systems?

In short, to ensure that human waste is being treated and disposed of properly. Even today, the TOST program routinely identifies homes that have direct pipes from their septic tanks to the ground surface or to surface waters. Waste coming directly from septic tanks is not yet treated enough to be safe to discharge and must be treated further in a drainfield or by an alternative method. Sometimes we find that there are homes in our community that have *never* had a septic system installed and are not hooked to the city sewer.

Where does the waste go?

When a septic system does not work properly (or does not exist in the first place), inadequately treated human waste can hurt public health and the environment. Improperly treated waste from a home can discharge to the ground surface, creating a public health nuisance. It can also make its way into area creeks, streams, rivers, and lakes, which hurts the quality of our surface waters. Inadequately treated waste can also travel underground and hurt the groundwater supply that *everyone* utilizes for our drinking water. Faulty sewage systems can result in ill health for the family and visitors to the home if a drinking water well is contaminated.

What harm can it do?

Human waste in our surface waters contaminates those resources and puts recreational or business uses at risk. If it's unsafe for people to swim, or if fish can no longer survive or thrive in the water, it can hurt the economy of our area. People who are exposed to contaminated water can sometimes contract diseases or infections like *E. coli* or *Giardia*, either by swallowing the water or by contaminating an open wound.

Do you know how your septic system works, or doesn't?

We have many reports of cases where a septic system has been installed incorrectly or with improper materials, and it ceases to function (or never did function) as intended. The homeowner may be completely unaware of a malfunctioning or improperly constructed system.

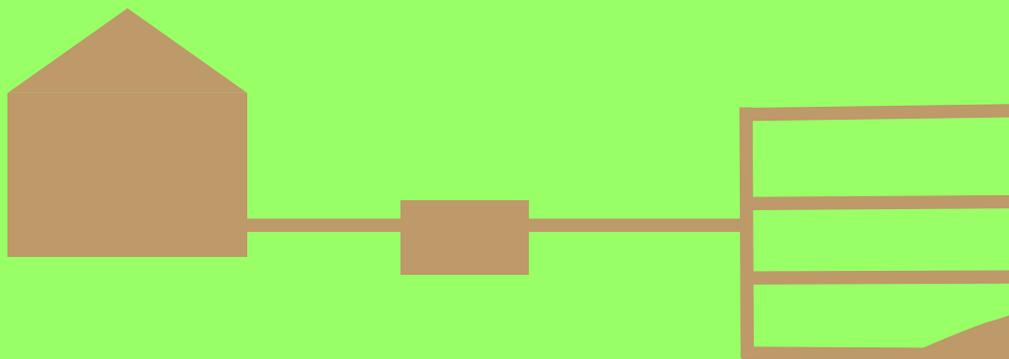
Many people assume that if they can flush the toilet and it "goes away," that the septic system must be OK. However, if the waste "goes away" to contaminate the environment because the septic tank is directly connected to a lake or stream, or if it creates a sanitary nuisance for someone else, it's really not a system at all, and it is not OK.

Why do evaluations?

An evaluation of the system is the only way to assure that a faulty system is identified before major problems develop. Just as homes built in the past were held to different building standards than new homes built today, older sewage systems are often not serving to properly treat waste from the home. In fact, many older homes have systems that have been found to be directly connected to the surface waters or to drainage pipes that are connected to surface waters. If a system is present, and is not adequately functioning, the TOST program seeks to identify those problems.

What if I have a newer home?

Even newer homes can and do have malfunctioning sewage systems. This can be due to faulty installation, improper usage, damage, or from simple neglect.



This publication is provided for informational purposes only.

It provides a general overview; for specific details about the program, please visit www.barryeatonhealth.org and click on Environmental Health.

Questions about the TOST program?

Contact the Environmental Health Division at (269) 945-9516 or (517) 543-2430.



Barry-Eaton
District
Health
Department

Be Active • Be Safe • Be Healthy

www.barryeatonhealth.org