



COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

(888)722-4234 • RIVCOEH.ORG

INFORMATIONAL BULLETIN NO. 163-24-EPO
Environmental Protection Oversight

Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems

What is an OWTS and how does it work:

An Onsite Wastewater Treatment System, or OWTS, is the approved method of sewage/wastewater disposal in areas where sewer connection is not yet available.

Also known as a “septic system”, OWTS are made up of a septic tank that collects sewage/wastewater from the home, and a dispersal field that allows the liquid sewage or “effluent” to disperse into the ground using leach lines, leach beds, or seepage pits.

The responsibility of having an OWTS:

If your home is connected to an OWTS it is important you understand the responsibilities involved in using this type of system. Each OWTS is designed specifically for the usage rates of the individual home/business. Improperly discharged sewage/wastewater is a public health hazard and can potentially contaminate drinking water if wells are in the area. To protect yourself, your family, and the groundwater in your community, it is important that your OWTS is properly maintained, and functions as designed. In fact, it is a violation of County Ordinance 650 to allow septic effluent (sewage) or graywater from sinks, showers, or laundry to discharge onto the surface of the ground in Riverside County. You can be cited and fined up to \$500 for each day the violation exists.

Potential problems:

There are many things that can contribute to an OWTS failure. These are the most common:

- **System age:** Septic systems don't last forever, even under the best conditions. For example, replacement of leach lines can usually be expected any time between 10 and 30 years, depending on conditions and maintenance.
- **Lack of proper maintenance:** Regular pumping of the septic tank is needed to remove solids and prevent clogging of the leach lines. Depending on usage, a septic tank should be pumped every 3-5 years. Older systems may require even more frequent pumping.
- **System overuse:** The size of the tank and leach field was determined based on the original number of bedrooms and fixtures in the house, and assuming one person per bedroom. In some cases, plumbing fixtures are added and/or the number of people living in the home far exceeds the original calculations. All the extra laundry, showers and toilet flushes put a strain on the system.
- **Poor soil conditions/high groundwater:** Dispersal from a leach field is based on the ability of the ground to absorb fluid, as well as evaporate moisture. Some soils naturally percolate better than others. They can easily absorb and disperse effluent from an OWTS. Soils with a lot of clay or rocks may have less ability to properly disperse effluent. In areas where groundwater level is already high, periods of heavy rainfall may affect the system.

How to prevent OWTS failure:

- Especially during the rainy season, you must be mindful of the impacts to your OWTS and reduce the load on your system as much as possible until the ground has had a chance to dry out.
- Reduce the amount of wastewater entering your system. Take shorter showers. Do not run water continuously while doing dishes or brushing your teeth. Consider doing laundry off site, at least temporarily, as it is the single biggest contributor of wastewater to your system.



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- Do a thorough check of your home for any water leaks. Even a small leak can add gallons of extra water to the OWTS daily. A leaky toilet valve can quickly flood out an OWTS quickly. Repair any leaks immediately.
- If you notice rainwater ponding around your leach lines, or flowing across them when it rains, try to divert the runoff to an area away from the leach field. Use caution when digging if you are uncertain where your leach lines are located.
- Have your tank pumped (both sides) by an approved liquid waste hauler a list can be found at: <https://weblink.rivcoeh.org/LFAPI/OpenDoc/321907> If they are also a Qualified Service Provider (QSP), the technician can also perform an evaluation of your system. A QSP is an expert in OWTS and can give you a good idea of the condition of your tank, valves, and leach lines. A QSP list can be found at: <https://weblink.rivcoeh.org/LFAPI/OpenDoc/321897>
- Install low flow showers, toilets, and sink fixtures.

What to do if the OWTS is failing:

If you notice sewage/wastewater coming to the surface on your property you must immediately take the following actions, in addition to the prevention methods described above:

- Take all necessary measures to confine the discharge to your property. Use dirt, sandbags or dig a trench to prevent sewage from flowing into the street, storm drain or neighboring properties. Disinfect any areas where discharge has occurred using liquid bleach or powdered, chlorinated lime. Do not allow these chemicals to flow into the street or storm drain.
- Have your tank pumped and your OWTS evaluated immediately by a licensed QSP (This is how you can determine what type of repairs/replacements are needed). It may be necessary to pump your tank several times during the repair process to prevent sewage from surfacing.
- Do not allow children or pets to come in contact with areas of sewage/wastewater discharge.
- If repairs or replacement of your OWTS is needed, ensure all necessary permits are obtained from the Department of Environmental Health, Land Use Program.

If you have questions, Environmental Health can help:

Land Use Program – This program in Environmental Health reviews plans for new and replacement OWTS/septic systems. They can also answer questions about OWTS/septic systems. Our Riverside office can be reached at (951) 955-8980 or DEHOWTS@rivco.org.

District Environmental Services (DES) – If you need to file a sewage or graywater complaint, please contact one of our DES offices listed below. Inspectors will investigate the complaint and provide you with the results. It is helpful if you provide us with the street address and/or APN of the complaint location. You can also file your complaint online at www.rivcoeh.org – Submit a Complaint.

DES Office Locations	
Riverside – (951) 358-5172	Indio – (760) 863-8287
Hemet – (951) 766-2824	Murrieta – (951) 461-0284
Palm Springs – (760) 320-1048	Corona – (951) 273-9140