

SEPTIC SYSTEM IMPACT ON SURFACE WATERS

A Review for the Inland Northwest



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INTRODUCTION

Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon have experienced tremendous population growth in the past 15 years, and this growth is expected to continue. To many people's surprise, a great deal of this growth is occurring in rural areas without centralized infrastructure, such as sewage treatment plants. This rural growth tends to be concentrated near rivers and lakes, where increased wastewater loads can threaten water quality. One of the biggest challenges facing state and local governments is how to deal with the increase in wastewater while protecting the water quality that is crucial to the natural beauty of these areas.

Septic systems, also known as "on-site wastewater treatment systems," are widely used in rural and suburban settings to dispose of wastewater. When operating properly, septic systems remove many pollutants and provide some measure of protection for human health and for the environment. But as rural populations grow and aquifers exhaust their ability to dilute wastes from ever-increasing numbers of septic tanks, water quality steadily deteriorates. Most state and local governments have regulations designed to protect public health from the worst contaminants from septic systems: water-borne pathogens and nitrates. But very few governments have created effective measures to address the increasing threat that septic tanks pose to the ecosystems of rivers and lakes.

Why have communities not done more to prevent septic systems from harming our streams and lakes? Perhaps because in the past, when rural populations were lower, the impacts were minimal and there was little threat to our surface waters. Or it may be that the connection between groundwater and streams (or lakes) was simply not well understood. But scientists have demonstrated that septic wastes in groundwater do ultimately flow into rivers or lakes,

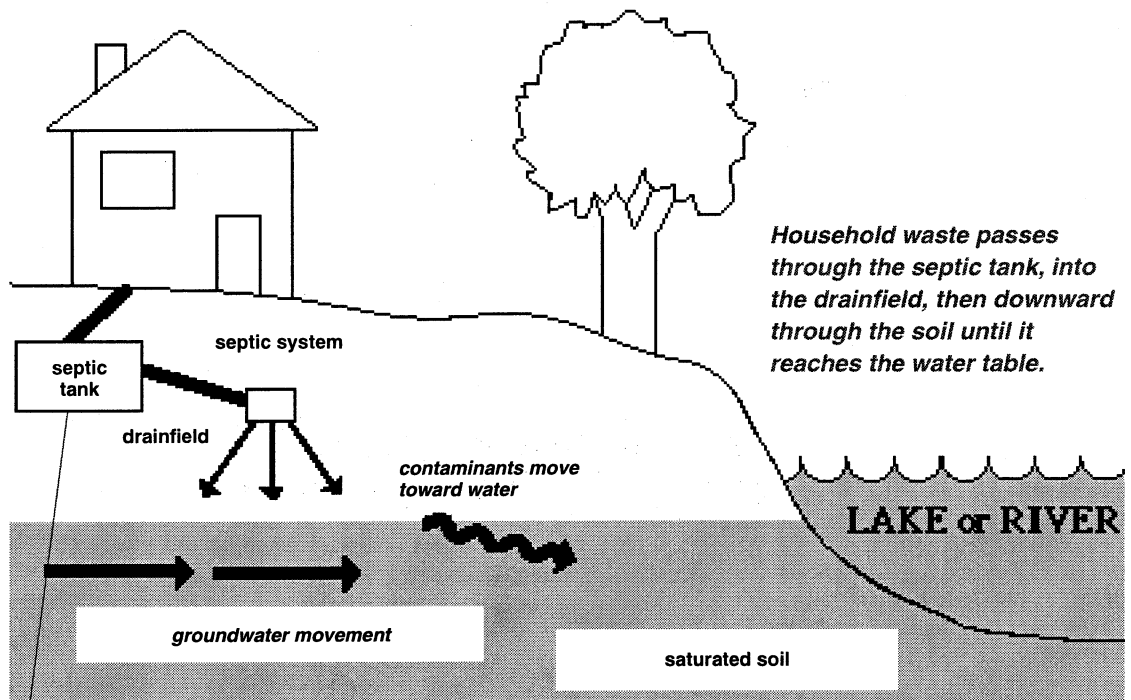
and that in many areas these wastes are already degrading the quality of nearby waters. The goal of this paper is to discuss this issue by examining the technical background of the problem, clarifying the risks, and reviewing options for mitigation.

Through a review of scientific and policy studies, this paper will discuss the following questions:

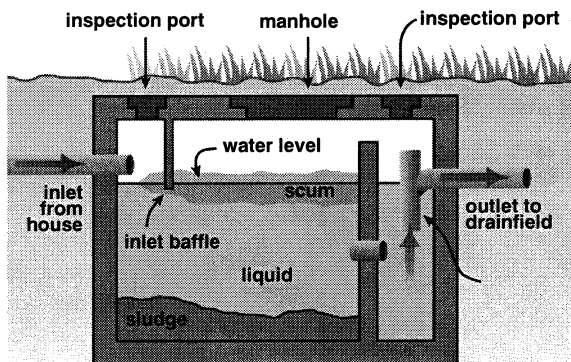
- What risk does septic effluent pose to streams and lakes?
- How do contaminants get from septic systems to groundwater?
- How do contaminants get from groundwater to streams and lakes?
- What are the wastewater treatment options when trying to achieve public health and resource protection goals?
- What are the existing policy and regulatory options for mitigating surface water impacts?

This paper is intended to give policymakers a broader appreciation of the risks that traditional septic systems pose to our surface waters, in the hope that this will lead them to develop strategies that maintain and improve the water quality of our lakes and rivers.

Waste's Journey from House to Water Table to Lakes and Streams



Up close: Septic Tank



Up close: Drainfield

