



Vilas County Zoning & Planning

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What Can You Do to Prevent Your Onsite Septic System From Freezing?

The first frost advisory of the year has come and gone – early? – maybe, but freezing is inevitable in the northwoods. It was an early warning for a lot of things, but one thing most property owners don't think of when they think of freezing is their Private Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (POWTS), also known as an Onsite Septic or Sanitary System. It doesn't happen every year, but freezing temperatures combined with a lack of snow cover can cause your onsite septic system to freeze-up.

Depending on your system, location, and water use, you may never have a freezing problem. Here are some precautions if you have had a past problem or are concerned about having a future problem. It is not necessary to do all of these, but you may pick and choose based on your situation:

1. Place a layer of mulch (*8-12 inches of straw, leaves, hay or any other loose material that will not compact but will stay in place*) over the pipes, tank and soil treatment system to provide extra insulation. You must do this before your system freezes, if done after the system is frozen it will delay thawing come spring.
2. Let the grass get a little longer in the late summer/fall over the tank and soil treatment area. This will provide extra insulation and help hold any snow that may fall.
3. Use water, the warmer the better! Sewage treatment systems are usually an advocate of water conservation, but if freezing is a concern, increasing low water use to normal water use can help the system. This includes spreading out your laundry schedule to possibly doing one warm/hot load per day, using your dishwasher and maybe even taking a hot bath. **DO NOT** leave water running all the time, as this will hydraulically overload the system.

4. If you know you are going to be gone for an extended period, plan ahead. This could include having someone use sufficient quantities of water in the home regularly or pumping out your tank before leaving. If the un-used tank is left full for several winter months, the sewage will get very cold in shallow tanks and can even freeze. If you then return home before temperatures start to rise, the liquid waste leaving the tank will be cold. By starting with an empty tank, you can then start fresh with liquid waste that is warm. If you use a cabin on a limited basis during the winter months, this may be a good idea as well.
5. Fix any leaky plumbing fixtures or appliances in your home. This will help prevent freezing problems and help you system work better year round. If you have appliances that generate very low flows such as high efficiency furnaces, you can put a heat tape in the pipe, and while on vacation have someone come by and run warm water for a while. Alternately you could install a small condensate pump that holds and discharges 2 gallons per cycle.
6. Keep all types of vehicles and high traffic human activities away from the location of the system. This is a good rule to follow year round. Pets and animals can be blocked from making trails and driving the frost down over your septic by fencing off the area during the winter months.
7. Make sure all risers, inspection pipes, and manholes have covers on them. Sealing them and adding insulation is a good idea. Insulation may be added during construction particularly if the top of the septic tank is within 2 feet of the surface.
8. Keep an eye on your system. If any seeping or ponding on the ground surface occurs, contact an onsite professional such as a WI licensed Septic Pumper or Master Plumber to help determine the cause and remedy.

What Should You Do If Your Onsite Septic System Freezes?

If your septic system is frozen, your first step is to call an onsite septic system professional such as a WI licensed Septic Pumper or Master Plumber. Many pumpers and plumbers have devices called steamers and high pressure jetters to try to unfreeze system piping. Other methods include adding heat tape and tank heaters. Cameras can be sent down the pipes to determine where the freezing is occurring and if repairs are needed. Unless the cause of freezing is corrected the piping will refreeze.

If the treatment area is full of ice, or there is evidence of leaking, there is no need to thaw the lines leading to the treatment area, as it cannot accept liquid until the area naturally thaws in spring. However, it is smart to find the cause of the freezing problem so that it can be addressed in spring, preventing future freeze ups.

If it is not feasible to correct the problem or correction equipment is not available in your area, the only other option is to use the septic tank as a holding tank, and having it pumped when full, until the system thaws naturally, which can be costly.

There are many misconceptions about how to deal with a frozen onsite system:

- **DO NOT** add antifreeze, salt or a septic system additive into the system.
- **DO NOT** pump sewage onto the ground surface.
- **DO NOT** start a fire over the system to attempt to thaw it out.
- **DO NOT** run water continually to try to unfreeze the system.

The above information is an excerpt from an article titled: "Freezing Problems with Onsite Sewage Treatment Systems". A copy of the complete article can be obtained from the Vilas County Zoning and Planning Office Sanitary Department, 330 Court Street, Eagle River, WI 54521. Please contact our office if you have any questions or for more information; we are open Monday – Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. We can also be contacted by phone at 715-479-3620, or email at zoning@co.vilas.wi.us.

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