



# SCHAEFER NEWS

Vol. 1 Issue 1

1-800-345-2776

1998

## INSPECTION OF SEPTIC SYSTEMS

It has been reported that about 25% of the homes in the U.S. have septic systems providing their waste disposal. There is probably no other single item associated with home ownership that would cost more to replace than a failed septic system. Informed buyers are aware of this and want to make sure that they are protected as a result of their inspection process. The question is "what type of testing should a buyer have conducted and how much of this evaluation can a home inspector provide.

In our opinion, there are very few if any home inspectors that are fully qualified to provide an evaluation of a septic system. We typically recommend that septic systems be evaluated by septic service companies that can pump the tank, evaluate the system and make recommendations if corrections are needed.

One of the limitations, even to septic service companies is the time of year the system is evaluated. A system that is functioning marginally at times or even poorly may appear to function well during other periods. During a dry season, the ground may accept the liquid waste through the leaching fields. Other times of significant rain, the ground may hold the rain water and prevent the leaching fields from functioning properly. However, while there may be some limitations, a full evaluation by a septic service company does provide significant protection.

### HOW AN AVERAGE SEPTIC SYSTEM WORKS:

Below (next page) is a diagram of a "typical" septic system and its components. There are other types of systems for special needs. Waste exits the house through a pipe that leads to the "Septic Tank." The tank has an inlet and an outlet; they both have a baffle that prevents solids and sludge from entering the leaching fields while allowing liquid waste to pass through the tank and into the fields. The solids settle to the bottom of the tank and should be pumped out periodically based on the size of the tank and number of people it serves. The liquids pass through the tank and enter a distribution box. This box distributes the liquid into the various number of pipes in the trenches of the leaching fields. The pipes in the leaching field are perforated on the bottom, rest on crushed stone and are covered with a filter paper. The perforation in the pipes allows the liquid to drain from the pipes into the ground.

### Typical Failures:

- Blocked or damaged pipe from house to tank
- Cracked or damaged tank
- Damaged baffles
- Failed leaching fields
  - Pipes are clogged with waste and no longer allow liquids to pass into the ground
  - Solids have passed into the fields clogging perforations in pipes. This is typically due to a broken baffle
  - The ground is saturated and does not allow waste to drain from the fields

