

Onsite Sewage Management Systems (OSSMS) What to Do After the Flood

Lismore City Council Local Government Area has over 8500 Onsite Sewage Management Systems (OSSMS) that it regulates. This document provides information and advice on OSSMS (septics, Aerated Wastewater Treatment Systems [AWTS], Reed Beds etc.) and Land Application Area (LAA) care after a flood.

NOTE. Prior to inspecting or working on an OSSMS always ensure that proper PPE is worn, (Gloves, eye protection, etc.) and that the system is checked for any dangers to persons or animals. Damaged and old tanks, tank lids and manhole covers can collapse and lead to serious injury or death.



Do I pump my tank during flooded or saturated LAA conditions?

No! At best, pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. Under worst conditions, (when the surrounding ground is saturated) pumping it out could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes. The best solution is to drastically reduce water use in the house. Only pump out your system using a licenced and suitably qualified pumpout operator when it is safe to do so and when there is no risk of a tank popping out of the ground.

What if my septic system has been used to dispose wastewater from my business (either a home-based or small business)?

In addition to raw sewage, small businesses may use their septic system to dispose of wastewater containing chemicals. If your septic system that receives chemicals backs up into or around your home or LAA take extra precautions to prevent skin, eye and inhalation contact. The proper clean-up depends on what chemicals are found in the wastewater. Contact Council or your service technician for specific clean-up information.

What do I do with my OSSMS (septic, AWTs etc.) system after the flood?

Once floodwaters have receded, there are several things homeowners should remember:

- Do not drink bore, well, or creek/dam water until it is tested. Contact your local health department.
- Do not use the sewage system until water in the LAA is lower than the water level around the house.
- Have your OSSMS professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling, gurgling from plumbing fixtures, or an inability to accept wastewater. AWTs with electrical equipment such as pumps, aerators, PLCs, control boards, and alarm systems are likely to be damaged and inoperable after inundation with flood water. Septic tanks may or may not be damaged by flooding since they do not have electrical components. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and debris and must be professionally cleaned once safe to do so. If the LAA is clogged with silt, a new system may have to be installed. The prior approval of Council will be required for any alteration or replacement work.
- Only trained specialists should clean or repair septic tanks because tanks may contain dangerous gases and viruses. Your local pumpout contractor can be found in the online yellow pages or contact LCC for a list of septic system contractors who work in your area.
- If sewage has backed up into the home, clean the area and disinfect the floor. Use a chlorine solution of a half cup of chlorine bleach to 3 litres of water to disinfect the area thoroughly. **Ensure that proper PPE is worn at all times and always wash hands thoroughly afterwards.**
- Once safe to do so and the ground is not saturated pump the septic system as soon as possible after the flood. Be sure to pump both the tank and any pump wells and the LAA if possible. This will remove silt and debris that may have washed into the system. **Do not pump the tank during flooded or saturated LAA conditions.** At best, pumping the tank is only a temporary solution. As mentioned earlier; under worst conditions (flooded and saturated ground), pumping it out could cause the tank to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes. **Do not pumpout** if there is a risk of this occurring.
- Do not drive on or over your LAA at any time especially after a flood. Irreparable damage can occur to your LAA. Also compacting the soil over the LAA by driving or operating equipment in the area will cause damage and the LAA to fail. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can reduce the soil absorption field's ability to treat wastewater and lead to system failure.
- Examine all electrical connections for damage before restoring electricity. **Engage a suitably competent and qualified electrician to inspect your system if unsure.**
- Be sure the septic tank's manhole cover and lids are secure and that inspection ports have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the outlet tee/baffle for blockages as scum levels can be raised inside the tank and blockages may be present.
- Check the vegetation over your septic tank and soil absorption field. Repair erosion damage and sod or reseed areas as necessary to provide turf grass cover.
- Reed beds may require the inlet and outlet manifolds to be checked for blockages, replacement of any washed-out gravel/media, and the replanting of reeds and signage. If silted up a suitably competent and qualified plumber should be engaged to safely remove the silted gravel/media and replace with clean gravel/media.
- Composting toilet humus should not be removed and disposed of during flood conditions if at all possible. Once the ground is no longer saturated this may resume as per your Approval to Operate.
- It is a requirement of all homeowners that they are aware of and comply with the conditions of operation in their Approval to Operate (ATO) documents issued to them by Council.

Please contact Lismore City Council's Contact Centre on 02 6625 0500 for further information.

lismore  city council