

LAND & WATER

Trouble With Your Lateral Field?

There are thousands of onsite sewage systems in Oklahoma and each year many of these systems fail. DEQ works approximately 6000 environmental complaints each year, 2000 of these complaints concern failing septic systems. What can you do? How do you find the problem? How do you fix your septic system? These and other questions are often asked of your local DEQ representative.

What is a lateral field?

It is a common method of disposing of all the wastewater generated from a household. Household wastewater often includes waste from the toilet, sinks, bathtubs, laundry, and water softeners. Normally, a lateral field system includes a 1000 gallon septic tank and a series of trenches (lateral lines) filled with rock. The lateral lines store excess wastewater as the soil slowly absorbs (percolation) the water. Most septic system failure occurs in the area of the lateral lines.

Four most common causes of lateral line failure

- Age of the lateral line system
- Excessive water use flooding the lateral lines
- Groundwater or surface water flooding the lateral lines
- Physical damage to the system

Age of the lateral line system

The average lifespan of a lateral line system is between 15 to 20 years. This lifespan can be shortened or increased depending how well the system has been maintained. System maintenance includes having the septic tank pumped (to remove solids) every three to five years and keeping the lateral line area mowed.

Excessive water use flooding the lateral lines

The amount of lateral lines required for a residence is determined by the results of the percolation test and the average amount of water used each month in the residence. Lateral field systems are designed to dispose of 6000 gallons wastewater per

month for a two bedroom home, 8000 gallons wastewater per month for a three bedroom home, and 10,000 gallons of wastewater per month for a four bedroom home. If your water use exceeds the average for your home, you could be flooding your system. Check for leaking faucets and toilets. Install water conservation devices on the shower heads and in your toilet bowls. Remember, hundreds of gallons of water can be lost even with small leaks.

Groundwater or surface water flooding the lateral lines

Lateral lines are supposed to dispose of wastewater only. If you have groundwater or surface water entering the lateral lines, the system could be flooded. Surface water entering a lateral field is fairly easy to determine. Does water puddle over the lateral field after a rain? Does the shape of the yard allow excess water to run across the lateral lines during a rain? Do the gutters on your house or an outbuilding drain onto the lateral field? Do you have an automatic sprinkler system in the lateral line area? If you have any of these conditions surface water could be entering your lateral lines. Groundwater entering the lateral lines is difficult to determine. If you suspect groundwater you should request assistance from your DEQ representative.

Physical damage to the system

Physical damage to a septic system can cause failure anywhere in the system. Lines may be collapsed, broken, or clogged. Has a driveway been constructed over the lateral lines? Has the soil been packed due to heavy traffic? Have outbuildings been built over the lateral lines? Are the solid lines entering or leaving the septic tank still connected to the rest of the system?

All additions to a lateral line or the installation of a new disposal field are required to be inspected by the Department of Environmental Quality or installed by a Certified Installer. If you have checked your system using the above recommendations and believe you may have located the problem and would like additional advice, or if you are not sure about the cause for failure, call your local Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality representative for additional information.