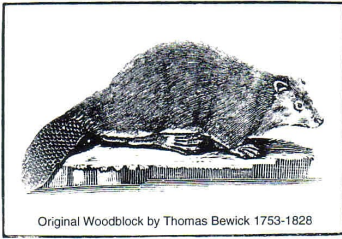


Little Beaver Creek



Land Foundation

How a Failed Septic System Impacts the Watershed

When septic systems no longer function properly they may potentially release raw sewage from homes directly into a Little Beaver Creek tributary or roadside ditch. Some failed systems leak raw waste into the soils, which can then pollute groundwater sources.

The untreated wastes that may potentially leak from failed septic systems contain large amounts of organic materials. Those organic materials, once released into a surface water system, provide a great food source for algae, which will 'bloom' in the presence of large amounts of untreated organic matter. As all this algae dies, bacteria help to decompose it. The bacteria use large amounts of oxygen in this process, causing low oxygen levels in the water, which is bad for fish and other aquatic life.



The leachfield from a failed septic system, from aero-stream.com

A low level of oxygen in the water is called hypoxia. Sometimes the problem can become so bad that anoxia, or a complete lack of oxygen, occurs, resulting in a 'dead zone,' or area of a body of water where no aquatic life is found. In time, as hypoxia nears anoxia, the bacteria cannot process the algae, because the bacteria require oxygen to live. This results in the raw waste beginning to accumulate and eventually move farther downstream – thereby creating significant stream reaches where very little to no aquatic life can be found.

In addition to impacting the aquatic life of a stream, failing septic systems can also pollute the drinking water supply for those with drinking water wells. Drinking water wells are usually utilized by the same households with septic systems, so if a septic system is failing upstream of a well, or a septic system is placed too close to a well, the chances of bacteria from the untreated waste polluting the drinking water can be high. This polluted water can cause illness in people who unknowingly drink it.

Many septic system problems occur because they are old. Usually your septic system is as old as your house if it has not been replaced due to failure or other problems. Septic systems should be pumped and maintained every three years, but many homeowners with septic systems do not know this, therefore increasing the chances of septic failure. Regularly maintaining your septic system is much cheaper in the long run than having to replace because of problems that can occur from a lack of maintenance.

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Since the Little Beaver Creek watershed is rural, many homes have septic systems instead of public sewage, making this problem greater in the LBC watershed than in more urbanized watersheds. If you own a septic system that you think is in need of maintenance, repair, or replacement, contact a septic service business. If your septic system is in need of extensive repair or replacement, contact the Health Department that serves your county, and they may be able to recommend sources of financial assistance, such as grants or low-interest loans. The Columbiana County Health Department can be reached at 330-424-0272, and the Mahoning County Board of Health's number is 330-270-2855.

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