

Guidelines for Decommissioning Residential Heating Oil Tanks

State and Local Regulations Applying to Unused Residential Tanks

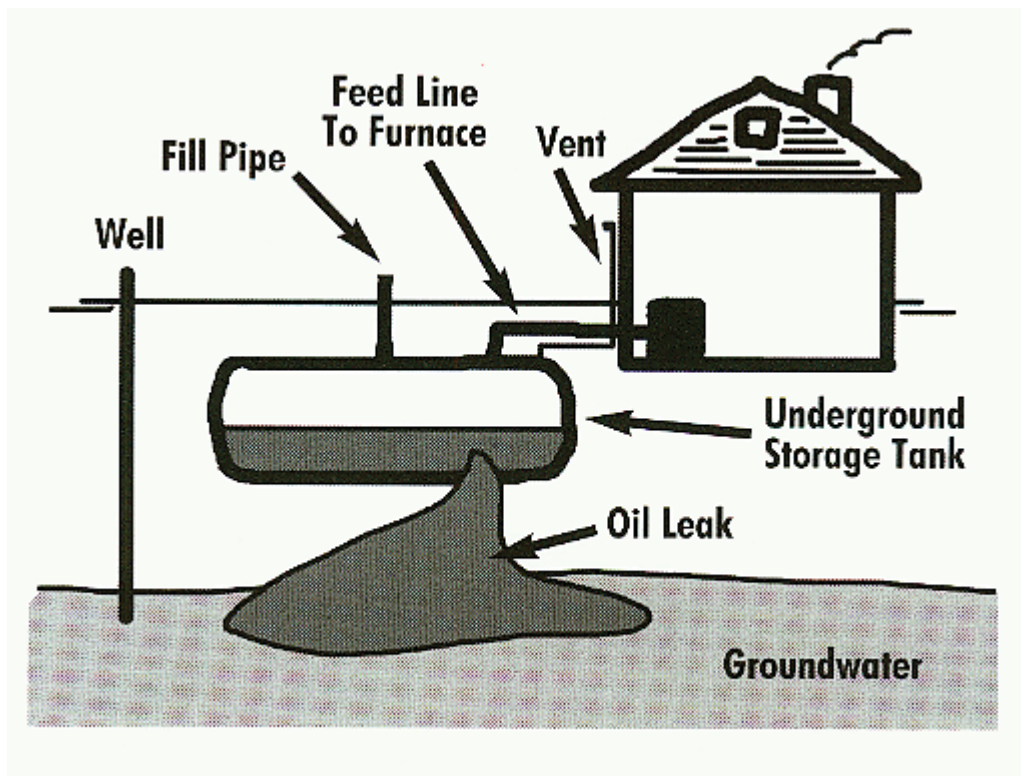
Steps to Remove a Tank or Decommission It in Place

Guidelines and Advice for Hiring a Contractor and Soil Testing Laboratory



HELP FROM THE THURSTON CO. HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Guidelines for Decommissioning Residential Heating Oil Tanks



Many Thurston County residents have aboveground or underground heating oil tanks that are no longer in use. These unused tanks can pose problems for property owners and the environment. A typical small heating oil tank can last 30 years or more before corrosion causes leaking, although this varies widely depending on the properties of the surrounding soil and/or thickness of the tank material.

A leaking tank can cause several serious problems for the owner and others, such as:

- Contamination of the soil on the primary and adjacent properties;
- Contamination of groundwater, which may serve as a source of drinking water;
- Contamination of surface waters;
- Vapor accumulation under or in nearby buildings;
- Collapse of old or unused underground heating oil tanks causing sinkholes.

Property owners can be found liable for contamination caused by a leaking tank. In fact, past or present ownership of contaminated property may result in liability. Because of this threat of liability, many lending institutions and buyers require decommissioning of unused heating oil tanks before they will finalize a property sale. In addition, delaying the clean up of any contamination may allow contaminants to spread, potentially increasing clean up costs. Therefore, it's generally in the best interest of an owner to remove or decommission an unused home heating oil tank.

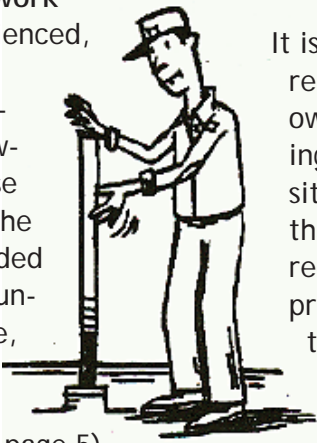
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Removing or Decommissioning a Residential Heating Oil Tank

See flowchart showing steps for decommissioning a tank, whether it is an **active tank** (one that is in use) or **inactive tank** (no longer in use.)

The heating oil tank owner can meet the requirements of the Uniform Fire Code, and may avoid possible future liability and real estate sales difficulties, by completing the steps outlined below. Lending institutions may have further requirements.

1. **Determine if the owner will do the work or hire a contractor.** Hiring an experienced, unbiased contractor to do the work is recommended. The owner can accomplish many of the following tasks; however, persons inexperienced with these procedures may harm themselves or the environment. These tanks have exploded under certain conditions. Therefore, unless the owner has suitable knowledge, training and experience, he or she should hire a qualified contractor to do this work (see Hiring a Contractor, page 5).



2. **Determine what is in the tank.** By inserting a long stick to the bottom of the tank, the depth of the oil inside can be determined. It is possible that water will also be inside, which might indicate a leak in the tank, a paste that changes color when it contacts water can be placed on the stick. This water detection paste is inexpensive and can be bought from most heating oil companies.

3. **Pump any remaining oil from the tank and dispose of it properly.** Completing this step as soon as possible may prevent contamination of soil and groundwater. However, this is not a long-term solution by itself. Abandoning an empty tank in the ground on the property can leave the owner open to the liability of cave-ins or the migration of leaked oil into groundwater.

4a. **Remove and dispose of the tank.** This step benefits the owner more than decommissioning the tank in place (step 4b) for several reasons.

- Soils contaminated by a leaking tank can be located and cleaned up.
- It is easier to take soil samples when a tank has been removed. It is recommended that a soil sample(s) be taken as an unbiased means to prove a clean closure even if there are no odors or visible signs of a leak.
- Many lending institutions and buyers require removal of unused tanks as a condition of sale.

It is a good idea to take photographs of the removal process for the record. Also, the owner should find out where the tank is being disposed. It should not be stored at the site. The owner should obtain documentation that the tank was disposed of properly. To be recycled as scrap metal, the tank must be properly cleaned out, the sludge should be treated as hazardous waste, and a hole should be cut in the end so the scrap metal dealer sees no sludge is left.

4b. **Decommission the tank in place.** Check with the local fire marshal and/or building department for permitting requirements and for approved materials to fill the tank. Keep in mind the following points before selecting this method.

- The owner may be required, by the lender and buyer, to have the soil beneath the tank tested.
- Because getting soil samples from underneath an underground tank is difficult, this may cost more than removing the tank.
- The tank must be pumped out and cleaned before it is decommissioned in place. All oil, rinse water, and sludge must be disposed of properly.
- Local ordinances may not allow you to abandon the tank in place.
- A tank that has been filled in place will be difficult to remove at a later date.

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5. **Test soils for contamination.** Check with local building and fire departments to determine if soil testing is required in the jurisdiction where the tank is located (see Local Government Requirements, page 6). Under the Model Toxics Control Act, if contamination is present these tests are required to prove that an adequate clean up took place. Even if a leak is not detected, soil tests are beneficial to the owner because they are a more objective way to legally document that the site is not contaminated. The contractors who remove or decommission tanks in place can collect soil samples and have them analyzed.
6. **Clean up contaminated soils.** The state Model Toxics Control Act (WAC 173-340) sets requirements for cleaning up contaminated sites. Contaminated sites should be reported to the State Department of Ecology at (425) 649-7000. How you handle contaminated soil depends on the amount of contamination.
7. **Document everything.** Keep a file of permits, lab results, disposal records, photographs, and reports from contractors regarding any cleanup.

Hiring a Contractor

For a list of local contractors, see the fact sheet [Contractor List](#), or check the yellow pages in the phone book under "Tanks - Removal." It is recommended that the property owner obtains a minimum of three bids, checks references, and makes sure the contractor's license is current before selecting one. If the owner hires a contractor, the owner is still liable for any environmental contamination. Therefore, it is important that the owner carefully researches the options.

Some important questions to ask contractors:

- Are they experienced? Can they provide the names and telephone numbers of current or recent customers as references?
- Do they have environmental pollution liability coverage?

- Do they collect soil samples?
- Which laboratory do they use for the analyses?
- Where will the tank, oil, and contaminated water from rinsing out the tank be disposed? Is that disposal site insured?
- What documentation, labeling, and other paperwork are provided? You should receive documentation of disposal of the tank, a copy of the lab results, documentation that the soil samples were handled properly, a copy of any permits required, and documentation of the disposal and/or treatment of any wastes.

Finding a Laboratory for Soil Testing

Several laboratories in the state perform the appropriate test for petroleum contaminated soil. It is recommended that an experienced, unbiased person collect samples. If owners elect to collect the soil samples themselves, they should call the laboratory for specific instructions regarding the sampling procedure.

Check the Tank Talk [Contractor List](#) fact sheet, or look under "Laboratories - Analytical" in the phone book. Laboratories are not certified by any government agency for these procedures. Prices vary widely. Therefore, property owners should obtain several quotes or bids before selecting a laboratory.

Some important questions to ask laboratories:

- Are they familiar with the recommended method for testing petroleum contaminated soil?
- Do they perform it regularly?
- Can they provide the names and numbers of recent customers as references?
- What are their sampling and shipping procedures?
- Do they provide the sample container?
- How long will it take to get the results?
- What type of documentation do they provide?

Local Government Requirements

The following table shows the different municipal requirements for decommissioning a home heating oil tank in Thurston County.

	Building Dept. Phone Number	Must I also Contact the Fire Dept.?	Is a Permit and Site Plan Required?*	Is an Inspection Required?	Is a Soil Test Required?***
Unincorporated Thurston County	(360) 786-5490	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, if inspector detects contamination or if tank is decommissioned in place
Bucoda	(360) 278-3525	No	Yes	Yes	Same as County
Lacey	(360) 491-5642	No	No	No	Only if tank is leaking
Olympia	(360) 753-8314	Yes (360) 753-8348	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rainier	(360) 446-2265	No	Yes	Yes	Same as County
Tenino	(360) 264-2368	No	No	Yes	Yes, if inspector detects contamination
Tumwater	(360) 754-4180	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, if inspector detects contamination
Yelm	(360) 458-8407	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, if inspector detects contamination

* Obtaining the proper permit is the responsibility of the homeowner, not the contractor. However, many contractors include this process in their service. If your contractor obtains the permit, make sure you receive a copy.

** Soil tests are always strongly recommended because they are the only way to legally document that your site is not contaminated.



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This document was adapted for use in Thurston County from a booklet produced by the Interagency Regulatory Analysis Committee (IRAC) called "IRAC Guidelines for Decommissioning Residential Heating Oil Tanks" (printed in April 1999). IRAC provides a forum for coordination between regulatory agencies that share concerns. To learn more about IRAC or become a member, call 206-689-3087.

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