

Questions & Answers

Underground Home Heating Oil Tanks

1. What is the problem with home heating oil tanks?

They rust and leak. In your neighborhood, which may be in a wellhead protection area, leaking oil could seep down through soil layers, mix with groundwater and eventually contaminate drinking water. A wellhead protection area is the supply area for a major municipal well. Thousands of people (perhaps yourself) rely on this well for water.

2. What if I no longer use oil to heat my home?

The Washington State Fire Code and Thurston County require oil tanks that have been out of use for more than one year be “closed” — that is, removed from the ground or properly abandoned (also called decommissioned in place). The owner must have any remaining oil removed within ninety days after the tank is out of use.

3. What should I do if I have an unused tank on my property?

- Find out what’s in the tank by doing a stick-test. Remove the filler cap; insert a long stick until it touches the bottom, and check for oil.
- Have all unused oil and other substances removed. This is the easiest, least costly, and single-most important action you can take to prevent soil and water contamination.
- Have the tank decommissioned. If removal would damage your home or other structures, you may have it filled with an approved material.

4. How can I tell if I have a leaking tank?

- Monitor your oil usage. If you notice a sudden unexplained increase in fuel, call your oil company. You may have a leak.
- Check for water — which may have leaked in if there are holes in the tank. Put a small amount of water-reactive paste (available from your heating oil distributor or the Tank Talk program) on the end of a long stick and do a stick-test. If there is water in your tank, the paste will change color.
- Inspect the soil for stains or strong oil odors (see [Signs and Symptoms of a Leak](#)).

5. What should I do if my tank has leaked?

- Call your heating oil distributor immediately so they can pump the tank or take other actions to stop the leak.
- If you have insurance, call the Pollution Liability Insurance Agency (see Question 7, Is there any insurance available?).
- Hire a clean-up contractor to examine the extent of the leak and clean up any contamination caused by the leak. Check the yellow pages in the phone book under Oil Tanks or Tank Removal, or ask for the Tank Talk [list of contractors](#).
- See Question 8, Do I need to report a leak or spill?
- Have the tank decommissioned — removed, if possible.

6. What does it cost to remove a tank?

Local contractors report it costs roughly \$1,500 to \$2,000 to remove an underground tank. This includes digging up the tank, hauling it away, disposing of it, and soil testing, but not the costs for clean up if there is soil contamination. Clean up of contaminated soils can cost an additional several thousand dollars. The sooner you have a spill cleaned up, the less extensive the clean up, and the lower the risk of oil spreading to a neighbor's property or water supply. Working on an underground heating oil tank can be dangerous. We recommend you hire an experienced contractor to perform the work.

7. Is there any insurance available?

Clean-up insurance is available for in-use heating oil tanks through the State of Washington Pollution Liability Insurance Agency (PLIA), (800) 822-3905. Tank replacement is not covered, and the home must continue to use heating oil. Check your homeowner's insurance policy to see if leaking tanks are covered. Under the Washington State Model Toxics Control Act, the homeowner or previous homeowner may be held liable for damage and clean up caused by a leaking oil tank.



Thurston County Environmental Health

Location: 921 Lakeridge Dr. SW, Rm 113
Olympia, WA 98502

Mailing Address: 2000 Lakeridge Dr. SW, Bldg 4
Olympia, WA 98502

Telephone: (360) 754-4111 • (360) 754-2933 TDD

8. Do I need to report a leak or spill?

- **For minor leaks:** Leaks or spills that only affect the soils near the tank are considered minor, and do not have to be reported to the Department of Ecology.
- **For major leaks:** Leaks that have (1) reached adjoining properties; (2) affected a well or groundwater; (3) caused vapor problems in nearby buildings; (4) pooled on the ground; or (5) caused extensive soil contamination, must be reported to the Department of Ecology at (360) 407-6000.

9. What assistance can the Tank Talk program provide?

Thurston County Health Department's Tank Talk program can help residents of wellhead protection areas:

- Determine if you have a tank, and help you find it.
- Clarify local regulations.
- Explain how to hire contractors.

If you have any questions or concerns, please give the Tank Talk program a call. We will be glad to explain your options as a tank owner and help however we can. Call us at (360) 754-4111; TDD line (360) 754-2933.

