



State of Alaska
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION
Prevention and Emergency Response Program

FACT SHEET
Spill Prevention for Residential Heating Oil Tanks

September 9, 1999

Proper care and maintenance of your fuel oil tank, lines, and furnace can reduce your chance of spilling oil and being faced with costly environmental problems. Fuel oil spills in residential areas can:

- contaminate drinking water wells, ground water, and soil;
- foul septic systems, requiring their replacement;
- cause odor and health problems in the home;
- contaminate stormwater drains, sewers, drainage ditches and surface water.

Each of these problems can cost thousands of dollars to correct. The following tips can help homeowners avoid costly repairs and problems associated with leaks and spills from home heating oil systems.

Inspect your tank and heating equipment before and during the heating season

- Check the condition of your tank and lines. The life of your tank depends on many variables such as the tank construction, tank installation, soil and ground water conditions, and maintenance of the tank. Inspect your tank for signs of corrosion.
- Make sure the fill cap and the vent cap are in place and tightly secured.
- Check the stability of the tank support and the ground underneath aboveground tanks. Many tanks have buckled or tipped due to instabilities and frost heaving. If you have a wooden tank stand, use only pressure treated lumber. Pressure treated 4x4's make an excellent tank cradle.
- Keep the fill pipe accessible and visible to the delivery company.
- Place oil lines between tank and furnace either under concrete or in protective tubing. Check fuel lines for crimps and replace any damaged fuel lines. Use flexible tubing if frost heaving is a problem.
- Keep all pipe connections clean and tight. Check for drips from the fittings and the filter.
- Clear snow, ice, insect nests or other debris from the tank vent to allow the tank to properly breathe.
- Is there a danger of ice or snow sliding off a roof and damaging the tank, tank stand, or exposed fuel lines?
- Look for signs of spillage near the fill and vent pipes. Stained soil and rock or distressed vegetation could indicate a fuel spill has occurred.
- Water can collect inside a tank from condensation and cause internal corrosion. Trapped water can be controlled by removing the water from a drain plug, using water absorbent socks, or periodically using additives.
- Buried tanks can corrode and leak without obvious signs on the surface. Be alert for unexplained fuel losses that might point to leakage.
- For inside tanks, be alert for signs of oil in the sump pump pit and floor drains, and for any oil smell in the basement or crawl space.
- All indoor tanks should have a vent alarm that alerts the fuel deliverer before the tank is full. When you receive oil, you can ask the deliverer to verify that the whistle is operating.

Things to consider

- Know how to properly measure your tank and calculate the volume in the tank. Determine your tank size and know when and how much to order from your delivery company.
- Don't leave your tank unattended during fuel transfers. Avoid overfills!
- Measure and monitor fuel usage and compare it to past seasons. A leaking underground fuel tank or line may cause unexplained increases in fuel consumption.
- Avoid using the area around or under the tank as a storage area. Heavy items can damage the fill or supply pipes.
- Protect fuel lines from damage by vehicles. Snowmobiles, heavy equipment, or heavy vehicle loads can damage underground lines if they are not adequately buried or protected. Aboveground fuel lines should be encased in protective tubing.
- Consider using a locking cap on the fill pipe to help prevent vandalism.
- Install a shutoff valve at the tank outlet to isolate the fuel line in case it starts to leak. If you see a leak in the line, close the valve to avoid spilling the entire tank volume.
- Do children play around the tank? Protect fuel lines so they cannot be used as handholds for children climbing on a tank.
- Consider a secondary containment area under an aboveground tank. A soil, sandbag, or timber berm with a fuel resistant liner will catch spills before they can contaminate surrounding areas.
- If you take your tank out of service, empty the tank and fuel lines completely. Abandoned tanks containing residual fuel are "accidents waiting to happen."
- If your underground tank is taking on water, a leak may be present. Your oil burner technician can check for water or provide you with a water-finding paste so you can check for yourself.

If a spill does occur

Accidents can happen, despite your best efforts to prevent them. In the event of a spill, the main priorities should be stopping the flow of oil at its source and containing the oil that has spilled. This will help minimize the impact to the environment and to your property and that of your neighbors. In most cases, cleanup consists of the removal and disposal of any contaminated soils or other media and repair or replacement of leaking tanks and/or fuel lines. Technical assistance is available from ADEC Prevention and Emergency Response Program staff, who may be contacted at one of the Area Response Team Offices listed below.

Homeowners are liable under State law for the cleanup of spills from home heating oil tanks on their property. Sometimes homeowner insurance policies cover accidental spills from home heating oil tanks. Many policies, however, specifically exclude such pollution problems. Check with your agent to find out if you're covered.

Any spill of oil greater than one gallon to land or any amount to water should be reported to ADEC. Fuel deliverers who discover an existing spill or contamination on a homeowner's property should inform the homeowner so that he or she can take steps to correct the situation.

For more information on spill prevention, cleanup, and reporting requirements, consult the ADEC Prevention and Emergency Response Program website at <http://www.state.ak.us/dec/dspar/perp/perphome.htm> or contact program staff at one of the Area Response Team Offices listed below.

Anchorage
Phone: 269-3063
Fax: 269-7648

Fairbanks
Phone: 451-2121
Fax: 451-2362

Juneau
Phone: 465-5340
Fax: 465-2237

- Outside normal business hours, call: 1-800-478-9300

Additional information on aboveground and underground heating oil tank requirements is available via the ADEC Storage Tank Program website at http://www.state.ak.us/dec/dspar/stp_home.htm.