



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Properly Maintaining Your Oil Tank and Furnace to Prevent Home Heating Oil Spills

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Background

About two-fifths of Rhode Island households use fuel oil as their primary energy source for home heating. Proper care and maintenance of your fuel oil tank, lines and furnace can reduce the 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; and contaminate storm water drains, sewers, drainage ditches and surface water.

Whether it is due to a deliverer's lapse of attention or defective equipment, or occurs outside or in the home, responsibility for a spill falls on the homeowner. Residue can leach from a yard or basement and spread through groundwater, fouling wells far away. Few homeowners know that insurance policies often exclude coverage for damage and cleanup. The bill for an overflow during delivery or a couple of weeks of a "small" leak can range from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars. The bottom line is that DEM, the environment, and residents share a profound, direct interest in preventing such mishaps.

Proper care and maintenance of your home's heating or fuel oil tank, lines and furnace can reduce the chance of a heating oil spill. There are many steps homeowners can take to ensure the safety of their furnace and oil tank.

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

- Check the condition of the tank and lines. The life of the tank depends on variables such as tank construction, tank installation, soil and ground water conditions, and maintenance of the tank.
- Make sure the fill cap and the vent cap are in place and tightly secured.
- Keep all pipe connections clean and tight. Check for drips and from the fittings and the filter.
- Know how to properly measure your tank and calculate the volume in the tank.
- Know when and how much to order from your fuel oil delivery company.
- Keep the fill pipe accessible and visible for the delivery company.

- Keep the vent line clear of any snow, ice or insect nests to prevent pressuring.
- If you take your tank out of service, remove the tank and lines completely. Many fuel oil delivery companies have delivered heating oil to homeowners' fill pipes that had no tanks attached to the other end, resulting in spills and damage that cost thousands of dollars.
- Check the stability of the legs and the ground beneath your above-ground tank. Many tanks have buckled or tipped due to instabilities.
- 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.
- Look for signs of spillage near the fill and vent pipes. Stained oil and rock or distressed vegetation could indicate that a spill has occurred.

If you discover a fuel oil spill, report it to DEM's Office of Compliance and Inspection weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 222-1360, or after hours, weekends or holidays call DEM's Division of Law Enforcement at 222-3070.

Interviews:

James Ball, Acting Administrator of DEM's Office of Emergency Response reviewed the different types of tanks used by homeowners, insurance coverage of spills, and provided an overview of steps that residents can take to prevent fuel oil spills.

John Leo of DEM's Office of Emergency Response provided some examples of problems the department has responded to related to tanks and spills.

Louis Taraborelli, Senior Vice President/Director of Operations for Taraco Precision Testing, Inc. described and demonstrated the safety features of various types of home heating oil tanks.

More Information for Consumers:

Additional Information about preventing fuel oil spills and cleanup is available on DEM's website, www.DEM.ri.gov, by clicking on Emergency Response from Offices and Divisions on the homepage.