

## INFORMATION ABOUT UNDERGROUND HEATING OIL TANKS

Many homes are or were heated by furnace oil, particularly prior to the “off-oil” programs that came about when natural gas became more available. Furnace oil was stored in underground tanks largely because above ground tanks were not permitted in some areas. Most tanks were located in the yards of residences with tank sizes ranging from 300 gallons to 1000 gallons.

As conversions to natural gas took place, the old oil tanks were commonly left in the ground. Some of these tanks were pumped out of any remaining oil, but not always. Often these tanks were filled with sand once the remaining oil was pumped out. Eventually, **all these oil tanks will corrode and rust out** causing leaks that will allow any remaining oil to leach into the ground. It is common for leaked oil to find its way into the perimeter drainage system of the house that could lead to a storm sump. When this happens, a strong fuel oil odour could permeate the inside of the house.

Occasionally, real estate transactions can be put at risk if a client purchases a property with an underground fuel oil tank and is denied homeowners insurance. If a client finds that an existing tank has not been registered, remedial action may cost them thousands of dollars. According to the Insurance Bureau of Canada, a home with an exterior oil tank older than 15 years, or an interior tank older than 25 years will not be insured. Increasing homeowner insurance claims resulting from leaking oil tanks are very expensive and can lead to high insurance rates, or even refusal of coverage.

**In B.C., it is the HOMEOWNER’S LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY to properly maintain the oil tank and clean up any spills or leaks that may occur.**

Leaking underground storage tanks may create several hazards including:

- Products and product vapours can generate a potentially explosive mixture
- Products can enter surface water
- Products can enter drinking water
- Products can contaminate surrounding soil
- Products can damage property

### **How to check if an underground oil tank is leaking**

Because the oil tanks are buried, it is difficult to detect a leaking tank. Some underground tanks may leak for years without owners realizing it. If oil consumption suddenly goes up, the tank may have sprung a leak. There are companies that test underground tanks for leaks. Call your fuel oil supplier to help locate an underground tank testing company.

### **What to do if an oil tank is leaking**

Suspect a leak in an underground oil tank? You should contact your oil supplier or your local municipality right away.

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**For more information about outdoor oil tanks, please see the Provincial Standards' information below:**

The 2006 BC Fire Code (BCFC) states that the owner or owners authorized agent is responsible for carrying out the provisions of the Code. The provision in the BCFC, for the decommissioning of an underground storage tank, used for supplying oil burning equipment (UST), requires that the owner use good engineering practice when **removing, abandoning in place, or temporarily taking out of service**, their UST.

Examples of good engineering practice are listed in the Appendix of the BCFC, and include:

1. Annex C of NFPA 30 "Flammable and Combustible Liquids Code,"  
<http://www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes/AboutTheCodes.asp?DocNum=30>  
(scroll to the bottom of the page, click on "View the 2003 version of this document", you will need to sign up under "All Other Visitors" to view)
2. API RP 1604 "Closure of Underground Storage Tanks, " (American Petroleum Institute)  
<http://apistandardsonline.api.org>
3. Part 9 of the "Environmental Code of Practice for Aboveground and Underground Tank Systems Containing Petroleum Products and Allied Petroleum Products," published by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment.  
<http://www.ec.gc.ca/ceparegistry/documents/regs/CCME/toc.cfm>
4. The BCFC is available online for general public access, and is available at local Public Libraries. You should check with the local government to find out if there are any bylaws that might also apply. Insurers should also be consulted, as they may have corporate policy regarding underground tanks. The Ministry of Environment has Fact Sheets regarding underground storage tanks.  
[http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/epd/remediation/fact\\_sheets/index.htm](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/epd/remediation/fact_sheets/index.htm)

**For specific details and additional information, please contact:**

Office of the Fire Commissioner  
Emergency Management B.C.  
Phone: 250-387-8397  
Fax: 250-356-9019  
e-mail: [Stephen.Watt@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Stephen.Watt@gov.bc.ca)

**OFC 24 Hour Contact Number 1-888-988-9488**

9.3.3(1) Except for a *storage tank system* that has been registered with the *authority having jurisdiction* as operating on a seasonal basis, when a *storage tank system* is to be *out-of-service* for more than 180 days, the *owner* or *operator* shall notify the *authority having jurisdiction* in writing, within seven days after the *storage tank system* goes out-of-service, providing:

- the name and mailing address of the *owner*;
- the name and mailing address of the *operator*;
- the location of the *storage tank system*;
- a description of the nature and quantity of the contents; and
- the registration number of the *storage tank*.

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**If you choose to remove your oil tank, here are a few helpful points to get you started:**

Before you decide to do anything with your oil tank, check with your local municipal government to ensure that you are in compliance with municipal regulations.

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- **Notify the Oil Supplier:** If you are converting from oil to natural gas or electric heat, or if you are replacing your tank, call your oil distributor and ask them to discontinue the oil service to your home.
- **Obtain a Contractor:** Hire a competent and authorized contracting company to do the tank closure and removal for you. Your oil supplier should be able to provide you with a list of certified contractors for the job.
- **Obtain a Local Permit:** Before any excavation work can be started, a permit to abandon the underground tank may be required.
- **Remove Product from the Tank:** All product, or oil, must be removed from the tank and lines before closing or removing the tank. Your supplier may pump out the reusable oil and credit your account.
- **Conduct Excavation:** Dig to the top of the tank and expose the piping.
- **Disconnect Piping and Drain:** All piping including the tank fill line should be disconnected, drained, and removed, or capped if it cannot be removed.
- **Clean tank and remove:** Oil sludge or residue should be removed and disposed of properly. Once the tank is cleaned, remove it from the ground.
- **Dispose of Tank:** Once the tank is removed from the ground it is ready for disposal. Check before you attempt to dispose of the tank to make sure someone is willing to accept it. Your fuel supplier will likely know of proper disposal locations. If your tank is larger than 1,100 gallons in capacity, you may be required to follow more stringent removal regulations.