



STEVE RICH
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Remove underground oil tank before it leaks

The bad news: If you've got an underground oil tank that was installed more than 20 years ago, you probably should get rid of it, now.

The good news: Having it taken out and replaced with an above-ground version may not cost you a cent.

Ticking Time Bomb

"Anybody with an underground tank that was installed prior to 1990 should consider removing it," said Steve Rich of Steve Rich & Associates, Environmental Contractors, Wood-Ridge (steve-rich.com). "Before that time, tanks did not have a coating to protect them (from rusting), and the bare metal is a ticking time bomb."

Once the tank begins to leak oil into the surrounding soil, he said, a repair isn't feasible — "Each year as it rusts, the tank gets thinner, so we can't weld it."

Homeowners are even more at risk now than in the past for financial liability, Rich said.

"Homeowner's insurance never covered the leak, itself, but if it impacted the groundwater or spread onto a neighbor's property, it was considered third-party damage; you could still get money to clean up the spill," he explained.

Since 2006, though, most insurance no longer covers such third-party damage. "It's really important that anyone who has a buried oil tank act now," Rich said, "before it starts to leak."



STEVE RICH & ASSOCIATES ENVIRONMENTAL CONTRACTORS, removes a 500-gallon underground oil tank at a Paterson site for Habitat for Humanity; Rich, at left, prepares to examine the tank. Below left, worker Justin O'Connell uses a dipstick to check a second tank on the site for the presence of water.

PHOTOS BY EUGENE PARCIASEPE, JR.

Government Aid

If replacing your tank with a new, safer, above-ground model would cause you financial hardship, you can get help. New Jersey residents can apply for a grant from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority if they:

- make less than \$250,000 a year in taxable income
- have a net worth of no more than \$500,000 (not including your primary residence and pension)
- spend more than 51 percent of their income on living expenses.

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This grant may reimburse you for all eligible costs associated with the closure or removal and replacement of your tank. "People can come into our office and fill out the paperwork," Rich said. "We have a grant expert who helps every customer." His firm charges nothing for this service. For more information on this program, visit njeda.com and click on "Applications."

A Lurking Leak?

As the owner of an older home, you're fortunate if you were given paperwork documenting the installation and/or inspection of your oil tank. If you still use heating oil and know you have a buried tank, how can you tell if it might be leaking?

One sign can be an unexplained increase in your heating oil use and bills. Sometimes, though, water may seep into the tank, or the tank make leak only when full, concealing the problem.

You also might notice a damaged pipe, soil that is discolored or smells of oil, or a sheen on the groundwater.

Rich suggested another ill omen — "On a property with high ground water, the tank can take on water and the boiler will shut down, because oil floats on water."

Companies such as his can do tests to determine the condition of the tank, including taking soil samples and doing a vacuum test that puts the tank under "negative pressure." Rich points out, though, that the fee for each of these starts at \$350, whereas the cost to file a grant application to have the tank taken out is only \$250.

"You're better off just having it removed and a new, above-ground tank put in," he said. "It can go in the basement, the garage or the backyard. We can create a utility area, somewhere that it will not be an aesthetic problem."

Abandonment Issues

Supposing you've purchased an older house with a modern, above-ground tank or gas or electric heat? Does that mean you can forget about underground-tank problems?

Not necessarily. If you didn't see any paperwork for a tank's removal, there may be one still buried on your property, and you'll need to make sure it was properly "decommissioned." An abandoned tank that still holds heating oil is ripe for leaks, and one that's totally empty can corrode and collapse, leaving a sinkhole.

You may spot these signs of an abandoned tank in your basement or back yard:

- Cut oil lines still sticking out of the wall or floor
- Old oil stains around the furnace
- An old fill cap on your property.

Building inspector Paul M. Arthur said although checking for oil tanks is not part of his job, he keeps an eye out for them.

"When I walk the property, I start on the outer edges and scan the whole yard, then start in toward the house," said Arthur, also an instructor at The Inspection 21 Home Inspection Institute, Maywood (866-463-6421). "I spend 45 minutes to an hour. I see how the land lays and how the water lays, and look at all four corners." He advised that if a buried oil tank exists, it usually will be found within 20 feet of the home's chimney.

"The law currently states that you can either remove an oil tank, fill it with foam or fill it with sand," Arthur said. "The only time I agree with foam-filling is if the tank is under a patio and they can't get it out. Most lawyers want the tank removed."

REMOVING AN UNDERGROUND STORAGE TANK (UST)

- Once the tank is located, a small track excavator is used to expose it.
- It is cut open and the contents removed with a vacuum truck. They are transported to a disposal facility or can be transferred to a newly installed above-ground tank.
- The tank is cleaned with absorbent pads and a squeegee.
- It is removed with the excavator and inspects for holes or signs of corrosion.
- The tank's "grave" is filled with certified clean fill.
- The homeowner receives a tank certification booklet that contains copies of local permits, a tank contents manifest, a tank disposal receipt, a certified clean fill receipt, a certificate of removal and a copy of the contractor's New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection tank removal license.