



# Preventing Pollution from Heating Oil Tanks

**Underground heating oil tanks can corrode, causing holes that release oil into the surrounding soil, groundwater, surface water and storm drains. These leaks can pollute our rivers, lakes, streams and bays. Owners of heating oil tanks may be held liable for damage caused by these leaks.**

## Did You Know?

The City of Seattle's Municipal Code SMC 22.800 prohibits anything but stormwater from entering the City's storm drain system.

## How Do I Know If My Tank Is Leaking?

Many residents use heating oil to heat their homes and, unfortunately, most residential heating oil tanks are 30-50 years old. Leaks are common when tanks get this old, but there are some simple ways to determine if your tank is leaking:

- Track your oil use. If your furnace seems to be using more fuel than usual, and the weather hasn't justified an increase, your tank may be leaking. Ask your oil company to chart your usage. Oftentimes, companies fill the tank on a quarterly basis and you may not realize the increase.
- Find out if water has entered your tank. To do this, put a stick with water-reactive paste on it into your tank. You can purchase the paste through a heating oil dealer or most hardware stores. If water is present, the paste will change color. A small amount of water is normal, but several inches may mean water is getting in through a hole in the tank, which means oil is also probably getting out.
- During the summer, when you're not using your furnace, measure the level of oil in your tank using a long rod, tape measure or some other measuring device. After a few weeks, measure it again. If the level is lower, then the

tank is probably leaking. If the level is higher, then you should check to see if water is entering the tank.

- For a nominal fee, your heating oil company should be able to conduct a tank inspection, which can evaluate the level of oil and water in your tank.
- If you smell oil around the tank, near your property's catch basins or in your basement, oil may have leaked from your tank. It may also have infiltrated to the bedding area of nearby underground pipes and found a drainage course into the groundwater or surface water. Residential heating oil is dyed a red color, so that it is easily identifiable.

## What If My Tank Has a Leak?

If you find that your tank has a leak, then call a contractor and have them pump all of the oil out of your tank. Once the tank is empty, have it repaired by a reputable company. You are responsible for evaluating the extent of the leak, determining if it's a threat to the environment and cleaning up the areas damaged or polluted by the leak.

If your leak has allowed heating oil to enter the storm drain system or any creeks, lakes, rivers or bays, then you must immediately report it to the Washington State Department of Ecology's Emergency Management Division at (800) 258-5990. If oil from your leak has reached adjoining properties, affected a well or groundwater, caused vapor problems in nearby buildings, pooled on the surface of the ground or caused extensive soil contamination, you should

## Leaky Tanks (continued)

contact the Northwest Regional Office of the Department of Ecology at (425) 649-7000.

Washington State's Heating Oil Pollution Liability Insurance Program can help with a variety of costs associated with cleaning up heating oil spills. The program is funded by a fee that oil dealers pay for each gallon they sell. More information on this program is available at [www.plia.wa.gov/heating/insurance.htm](http://www.plia.wa.gov/heating/insurance.htm).

### No Longer Using Your Tank?

If you have a heating oil tank that is no longer in use, then it's a good idea to have it removed – especially if you plan on selling the house. Often, home buyers and lending institutions require assurance that the property being sold is not contaminated; and the best way to do that is to remove the tank and sample the surrounding soil. If removal isn't possible, and you don't expect to sell the house, a contractor can "close your tank in place" by pumping out the oil, cleaning out any sludge, removing or capping lines and filling the tank with inert solid material. Companies that do this kind of work can be found in the yellow pages under "tanks."

### Make Sure You're Covered

Washington State created the Pollution Liability Insurance Agency (PLIA) to make pollution liability coverage available for owners of active (in use) heating oil tanks; coverage is often not available through homeowners' insurance companies. This program is funded by a fee that heating oil dealers pay per gallon of heating oil sold. Heating oil is defined as diesel, kerosene or stove oil. PLIA insurance covers:

- Up to \$60,000 for cleanup of contamination resulting from accidental releases that start after the active tank is registered with PLIA.
- Up to \$1,500 for property restoration (e.g. landscaping).
- Costs in excess of other valid insurance or warranties.

The insurance does not cover releases from inactive tanks or other sources; releases that started before registering with PLIA; removal/repair/replacement of the tank/lines/furnace and emergency heat restoration.

There is no cost to register for PLIA insurance, but you must complete and submit a registration form to PLIA, which is available at [www.plia.wa.gov/RegFrmProcedWebFull.pdf](http://www.plia.wa.gov/RegFrmProcedWebFull.pdf). You must be registered with PLIA prior to the start of any accidental release in order for the cleanup to be covered. If you suspect a release from your active, registered heating oil tank, you must contact PLIA at (800) 822-3905 or (360) 586-5997 to file a claim.

### Where to Get More Information

- Contact the Resource Venture at **(206) 389-7304** or [help@resourceventure.org](mailto:help@resourceventure.org) if you have additional questions about your heating oil tank.
- For questions regarding insurance, contact the Pollution Liability Insurance Agency at **(800) 822-3905** or [pliamail@plia.wa.gov](mailto:pliamail@plia.wa.gov).

### At Your Service

The Resource Venture provides free environmental consulting services to Seattle-area businesses. We help companies lower their utility costs, obtain rebates, comply with regulations and receive public recognition, all while protecting the environment. Since 1990, the Resource Venture has helped thousands of businesses recycle, use less water, prevent stormwater pollution and build sustainably. We are a program of the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with Seattle Public Utilities.



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