

Flathead County Regional Septage Treatment Facility and Biosolids Composting Facility

FAQs

The answers provided for the FAQs below is based on the best available information to date. As the project develops and more information becomes available, responses to the FAQs will be updated.

Purpose

1) Why does the County need this Treatment Facility?

The Flathead County Septage Treatment Facility is a solution to preserve environmental quality and address population growth within our community. Flathead County has an estimated 30,000 wastewater treatment systems already in-place, with continued growth to occur in the upcoming years. The increasing number of septic systems, in addition to the dwindling amount of available land for current septage disposal methods, has created a potential problem that could negatively impact the environment and our groundwater resource in the valley. Therefore, it has led us to the need to create a regional solution to mitigate issues related to septage and biosolids for our community.

2) What is a Wastewater Treatment System (WWTS)?

A wastewater treatment system is a system that is used to treat, or reduce contaminants, from wastewater that has been discharged from a home or business. The treated water, or effluent, is then discharged back into the receiving environment. A WWTS is commonly referred to as a drainfield. Septic tanks are an important part of on-site wastewater treatment systems, and they provide primary treatment of the wastewater before it is discharged into the groundwater. Over the years organic and inorganic solids and some liquid, also known as septage, accumulates in the septic tank and must be removed every 3-5 years to prevent from overflowing and passing this undesirable material into the drainfield which may cause catastrophic failure of the system. The septage that is pumped from septic tanks will be taken to the Flathead County Regional Septage Treatment Facility to be treated.

3) Where is septic tank sludge treated currently?

The local wastewater treatment plants located in Whitefish, Kalispell, and Columbia Falls are required to meet strict effluent limits and as a result utilize sensitive biological treatment processes. Septage, which is a very high strength waste, can easily upset these treatment processes resulting in an exceedance of effluent limits which is a violation of State law. Therefore, the treatment plants are unable to accept septage from surrounding septic tanks. As a result, septage in Flathead County is currently disposed of through land application which includes injecting the untreated septage into the soil.

4) Are there any other facilities like this in the area?

The proposed septage treatment facility will be the first of its kind in Montana. The biosolids composting process is far more common and there are similar facilities in Hamilton and Missoula as well as Coeur d' Alene, ID

5) How long has this project been in the works?

Discussions of a solution for septage treatment has been ongoing for several years due to the projected population growth of our county and the limited availability of land for land application purposes. This project came together as a collaborative effort between the Flathead County Health Department, the cities of Kalispell, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish, and the Lakeside Water and Sewer District. The current project also includes information from past planning efforts including the 2018 City of Kalispell Biosolids Management Plan, the 2018 City of Columbia Falls Wastewater Facility Plan, and the 2016 City of Whitefish Preliminary Engineering Report.

6) Where can I learn more?

Flathead County will have multiple public hearings to allow for public input regarding the new Regional Septic Treatment Facility and Biosolids Composting Facility. The first is scheduled for December 1st, 2022.

Design and Construction

1) Where is this facility located?

Site locations are under evaluation and the most promising is located on Wiley Dike Road in Somers, MT just north of the existing Lakeside Water and Sewer District wastewater treatment lagoons.

2) Why did you choose this location?

This site was selected for several reasons. First, the property is of adequate size to house the proposed facility. A second factor is its proximity to the Lakeside County Water and Sewer District (LCWSD).

3) What will it look like?

The design of the facility is being handled by HDR, which is the company that has been selected to complete the project. More information about the design will be provided as information becomes available.

4) Will there be a lot of odor?

The facility is planned to be located indoors and will be equipped with odor control.

5) How much will this facility cost?

Funding for the construction of the Regional Septage Treatment Plant and Biosolids Composting Facility comes from a 2021 ARPA grant application. The grant included a construction budget of \$15M, however exact costs will depend on where the facility is sited, the extent of off-site costs, and the cost to dispose of treated wastewater once the site is functioning. The definitive cost of the project will be updated once the site and preliminary design of the project are completed.

6) What studies went into this construction?

Careful consideration was put into the design of this project to ensure that the facility will meet all Montana DEQ and EPA requirements with minimal impact to our watershed. The new facility will take untreated septage that is currently disposed of on land in the valley with no treatment, and instead, with the help of Lakeside's treatment facility, treat this such that the liquid can be used as irrigation for crops and the solids can be converted into compost. An engineering report was developed that was used as the basis of the ARPA grant application previously mentioned. This report, combined with previous studies completed by Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls served as the basis of the sizing and development of cost estimates for this project.

7) Will there be an environmental review?

The project will meet the requirements of the funding agency and Montana DEQ which includes following the Montana Environmental Project Act (MEPA) Process.

Operations

1) Who will run the plant?

Final decisions for plant operations are still being determined, and there are multiple options being considered. One option would be to have a private contractor run the facility. Other options include management through the County, or to lease the facility to Lakeside. More information about operations will be provided as information becomes available.

2) When can we expect it to come online?

The completion date for this project has not been established yet. More information about the timeline for this project will be provided as information becomes available.

3) What will happen to the composted material that is made at the facility?

The biosolids compost material will meet Class A requirements for suitable public distribution. Compost will be available for use by the County and municipalities. Depending on the amount produced, additional compost will be available for sale to the public.

4) How do we make this revenue neutral?

The operation of the facility will be funded by tipping fees. A tipping fee is a fee paid to the septage treatment facility to help cover the operational costs of treating and disposing of septage. The tipping fee is charged based on the volume of septage or biosolids being delivered to the site. Additional information about tipping fees will be provided as it becomes available. In addition, the compost material will meet Class A requirements for suitable public distribution, and the compost will be available for sale to the public.