Environmental Public Health
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Indianapolis, IN 46204

Guidance on Drywells and Cesspools

For the purposes of this guidance document, drywell and cesspool shall be defined as follows:

"Cesspool" means a relatively shallow underground reservoir from which effluent seeps out of the sidewalls. A cesspool is typically not preceded by a septic tank. A cesspool may also be referred to as a seepage pit.

"Drywell" means a subsurface excavation, typically reinforced along the outer walls with brick, blocks, metal, or precast concrete and may contain aggregate in the interior of the lining. A drywell is often bottomless. A drywell may or may not be preceded by a septic tank and is usually deeper than thirty-six (36) inches. Sewage seeps out of the sidewalls and bottom of the drywell.

The Indiana Department of Health has not considered the use of drywells or cesspools as a means of on-site sewage treatment for over 70 years. There are many public health and environmental reasons why Indiana's on-site sewage system rules do not allow for the construction or use of drywells or cesspools in this state.

Rule 410 IAC 6-8.3 *Residential On-site Sewage Systems* requires that all homes not connected to sanitary sewer utilize one of the following methods for sewage treatment:

1. an on-site sewage system that minimally consists of a septic tank and a soil absorption field that is not in failure;
2. a sewage holding tank in compliance with IC 16-41-25-9;
3. a sanitary vault privy installed in compliance with Bulletin S.E. 11, 2021; A sanitary vault privy may be used as the sole method of sewage disposal only if the dwelling or residential outbuilding does not have interior plumbing, including fixtures, water lines, waste collection piping, or residential drains. A sanitary vault privy may also be used in conjunction with another type of on-site sewage system; or
4. an onsite residential sewage discharging disposal system in compliance with IC 13-18-12-9(d).

The configuration, construction, installation depth, and function of a drywell or cesspool does not meet the definition of a soil absorption field, holding tank, sanitary vault privy, or an onsite residential sewage discharging disposal system. Continued use of a drywell or cesspool would not be compliant with Rule 410 IAC 6-8.3 or the statutes referenced above.

Rule 410 IAC 6-8.4 defines a soil absorption system as "pipes or chambers laid in a system of subsurface trenches or pipes laid in elevated beds into which the effluent from the septic tank is discharged into the soil for treatment and dispersal." This rule also allows a maximum installation depth of 36" for a soil absorption field for new construction and up to 48" for a replacement system, when necessary and if the soil structure allows for those depths.

The use of drywells and cesspools in heavier textured soils encourages early clogging of the limited infiltrative surface that may cause overflow or backup in the system. In more permeable soils, this organic mat formation may not form sufficiently to protect groundwater. When drywells or cesspools are used as a means of sewage disposal in more permeable soils, there is great risk of contamination of potable, ground, and surface waters. This type of contamination is typically hard to confirm and even harder to trace to a specific source.

Drywells and cesspools shall not be permitted for new construction or repairs or replacements as part of or as an alternative to one of the four acceptable options listed above. Existing drywells should be eliminated, if possible, when located. There were many drywells permitted by local health departments years ago which are still in use today, and we are not asking local health departments to actively search for drywells to abandon. However, when the local health department does come across a drywell, consideration should be given to replacing it with an acceptable means of sewage disposal as outlined above, especially in the case of a complaint or a health hazard. If there is a plan for extension of sewer in the near future, consideration may be given to allowing a drywell to continue to serve the home until a sewer connection is made, as long as the drywell is not creating an imminent health hazard. It is understood that there may not be the financial resources or an option for installation of an on-site sewage system to replace all drywells; however, if there is any evidence of seepage to the surface from the tank or drywell, including evidence of past seepage, backup in the home, or contamination of potable or surface water, abandonment of the drywell needs to be ordered by the local health department as soon as possible, as this is a public health hazard.

An open cesspool is a health hazard as contact with sewage is likely, and all cesspools should be required to be pumped out and abandoned as soon as possible to prevent any contact with the sewage.

A sewage holding tank may be considered for temporary or permanent use as a means of abating a health hazard until an adequate means of sewage disposal can be installed or sewer connection secured.