

How to choose a septic service

What a pump-out should cost, how often your system really needs servicing, and the permit and licensed-plumber rules that apply

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A septic system is invisible until it fails, and by then the bill is a new land application area rather than a pump-out. What separates septic services is not the size of the truck - it is whether they service your exact system type to its accreditation conditions, and whether they handle the permit and compliance paperwork Tasmanian law actually requires.

What it should cost

A standard domestic septic pump-out (say a 3,000 to 4,500 litre tank) typically runs about \$300 to \$600 when booked in advance; large or commercial tanks run \$600 to \$1,000 or more, and far-regional jobs carry travel on top. A full desludge, which removes compacted sludge and crust rather than just the liquid, is more, commonly \$450 to \$900. A pre-purchase or standalone system inspection is usually \$250 to \$500.

If you have an aerated wastewater treatment system (AWTS) the cost profile is different: these need scheduled servicing, often quarterly, at roughly \$150 to \$300 per visit, plus a periodic desludge of the primary chamber on a multi-year cycle and parts such as blowers and irrigation pumps when they fail. Over a year a serviced AWTS usually costs more to run than a conventional tank's averaged pump-out; that is the trade-off for treating effluent to a standard that can be irrigated.

What the law requires

In Tasmania, installing, altering or replacing an on-site wastewater management system requires a plumbing permit from your council as permit authority, and the system must be designed by a suitably qualified designer to the Australian Standard (AS/NZS 1547) and installed by a licensed plumber. A replacement system or a new land application area needs a fresh permit - you cannot simply swap a failed system for a new one.

An AWTS carries accreditation conditions, and as the owner you are required to hold a maintenance contract with a licensed plumber and to notify the permit authority when the system is serviced. When you sell the property, a system with a service history and records is worth considerably more than one with no paperwork, so keep every service report.

Red flags

A pump-out price far below the others, which usually means the compacted sludge is left behind or the waste is not lawfully disposed of.

Cannot tell you the make and accreditation category of your own system.

Services an AWTs without being an authorised agent for that specific manufacturer.

Offers no report to the council for a system that requires one.

Recommends a full replacement before anyone has assessed the site and the permit requirements.

Cash only, with no disposal docket for the waste removed.

What good looks like

Asks what make and model your system is before quoting.

Gives the servicing interval from your system's accreditation, not a generic rule of thumb.

Includes the council service report in the price and leaves you a copy.

Talks about sludge level rather than just the calendar.

Explains the permit and design process if the system needs replacing.

What to ask

- "What system have I actually got - a conventional septic tank or an AWTs - and what are its servicing conditions?"
- "For an AWTs, are you an authorised service agent for my system's manufacturer or accreditation?"
- "Does this servicing price include the report to the council, or is that extra?"
- "Will the pump-out remove the compacted sludge, or just the liquid?"
- "How often does my system actually need pumping - by sludge level, not just by calendar?"
- "If my system has failed, who designs the replacement and who obtains the plumbing permit?"
- "Will I get paperwork I can hand to a buyer when I sell?"

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