



Commonwealth of Pennsylvania



**pennsylvania**

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL  
PROTECTION

Bureau of Environmental Cleanup and Brownfields

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For more information, visit  
[www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Storage Tank Cleanup.

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## Home Heating Oil Releases

Home heating oil releases can result from leaks, spills, overfills, structural failure or malfunctions of the tank system. When released indoors, heating oil can damage both a home and its contents and cause health problems. When released to the environment, heating oil can pollute drinking water supplies, contaminate soils and expose the tank owner to liability if neighboring properties are affected by the release. Heating oil releases can also be expensive to clean up. Prompt action to stop, contain and clean up a heating oil release can greatly reduce or eliminate adverse impacts to property, health, and the environment. This publication provides information to help individuals deal with a heating oil release and any subsequent cleanup.

### Prevent Fire, Explosion and Exposure

#### As a precaution:

- Turn off any open flames or ignition sources (if this can be done safely and quickly).
- Keep all ignition sources away from the area until the release is completely cleaned up.
- Don't smoke or light matches in the area.
- Don't turn on any electrical items.
- Avoid breathing heating oil vapors for extended periods and protect your skin and eyes from contact with heating oil.

#### Leave the premises immediately and call 911 if:

- The release occurs near an open flame or ignition source.
- High concentrations of vapors (odors) are present.
- You are unsure of the safety risks.

### Stop or Contain the Release

**Prompt action to stop and contain a heating oil release will help to minimize the scale and cost of the cleanup.**

#### If safe to do so:

- Check to see if closing the valves on the tank or fuel lines will stop or slow the flow of oil.
- Try to capture the release with buckets or pans, or contain it using absorbent materials (see *Absorption and Disposal* on page 2).
- If a sump is nearby, shut off the sump pump and check the sump and discharge point for heating oil contamination.
- Close off floor drains and keep heating oil away from other pathways to the environment such as cracks in basement floors and gaps between walls and floors.
- If the release occurs outside, try using a shovel to build a dike to contain the oil or divert it to an area where it can be contained away from any water wells, streams, drainage areas or buildings.
- Call a professional, such as the heating oil distributor, to remove oil from the tank and fuel lines, as needed, to prevent the further release of heating oil.

#### Immediately call for assistance if:

- The release is large in volume.
- Oil is flowing unchecked from the tank or fuel lines.
- The release cannot be stopped or contained using the methods described above.

Many local fire departments (call 911), heating oil distributors or spill response professionals can respond with materials to help contain the heating oil release and recover any free-standing heating oil. Find out who provides this type of assistance in the local area and have emergency contact numbers handy in the event of a release.

## Report the Release

If the release has contaminated or could potentially contaminate groundwater or surface water, it must be reported to the local Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regional office. Since the potential to contaminate groundwater or surface water is often difficult to assess, it is recommended that all but minor releases to the environment (see below) be reported to the DEP regional office. DEP can assist with information on ways to minimize the adverse effects of a heating oil release as well as how to conduct a successful environmental cleanup. DEP may send a representative to the property to inspect the release. Heating oil releases may be reported to DEP 24 hours per day, seven days per week. A list of DEP regional offices and the counties they serve is available on the last page of this booklet and at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search terms: Regional Resources or Report An Incident.

If the release was caused by the heating oil distributor (i.e. due to improper fuel delivery), immediately report the release to the company and ask them to recover any released oil and clean up any contamination.

The release may also need to be reported to the insurance company if the tank owner has heating oil release coverage.

## Clean Up the Release

The tank owner is responsible for ensuring that the released heating oil and any resulting contamination are cleaned up.

**If the heating oil release is too large or extensive to be cleaned up using the methods and materials described below, or if groundwater or surface water are impacted, contact a professional to conduct the cleanup.**

## Minor Releases

Minor releases often result from small spills or drips at the fill pipe, or from small leaks in the tank, the fuel lines or the fittings. Minor releases are small in volume; they do not impact the environment, or they result in only minor impacts to soil. However, even minor releases should be cleaned up. When cleaning up a minor heating oil release, be sure to wear protective gear, such as rubber gloves, protective eyewear and clothing. Avoid breathing heating oil vapors for extended periods.

### *Absorption and Disposal*

For minor releases of heating oil, absorbent materials commonly found around the home, such as kitty litter, sawdust, peat moss, sand, newspaper, etc., can be used to soak up the released oil. Absorbents should be removed as soon as they become saturated, placed in double plastic bags and sealed. Place the bags in a lined trash can or on plastic sheets to avoid spreading contamination to other areas of the home or property. Contact the local trash hauler for information and guidance on the proper disposal of oil-contaminated materials. Minor amounts of soil that is stained or contaminated with heating oil may also be removed, handled and discarded in the same way as saturated absorbents.

### *Odor Control*

Even minor releases of heating oil can result in major odor problems. Extended exposure to heating oil vapors can cause health problems, so odor control is critical. If the release occurs inside the home, such as in the basement or living areas:

- Close off openings to other areas of the home to prevent odor migration to uncontaminated parts of the building, including doors, laundry chutes, pet doors, etc.
- If there is forced air heating, shut down the heating system and close any heat registers, cold air returns, etc.
- Open doors and windows to the outside in the contaminated area to ventilate odors.

Persistent odors may require the services of a cleanup professional. Fire and water damage restoration specialists may also be able to assist in removing persistent odors.

### ***Oil Stain Removal***

Materials that have been in contact with heating oil should be discarded or thoroughly cleaned. There are several commercial oil cleaners and stain removers available. Household degreasers/cleaners may also be used to remove oil staining. Products that are applied directly and wiped off with a cloth or paper towels are preferred since they do not generate oil-contaminated rinse water. Rinse water contaminated with heating oil can spread contamination and should not be disposed of in drains, sumps, storm sewers or on the ground. Any discarded oil-stained materials, or rags, paper towels, mops, brushes, etc., used to clean up heating oil should be bagged and discarded in the same manner as absorbents described on page 2.

### **Environmental Cleanup**

Most heating oil releases that have impacted soil, groundwater or surface water will require the services of an experienced environmental cleanup professional (contractor). Using an experienced contractor will help to ensure that the heating oil cleanup will be successful and will meet all state standards and requirements.

### ***Hiring a Contractor***

Heating oil distributors, insurance companies, the county emergency management agency, local telephone directory or an Internet search may be of assistance in finding a contractor. Some search terms to consider are "Spill Response," "Spill Control," "Environmental & Ecological Services," "Tank Installation & Removal," and "Tank Cleaning." Although use of a DEP-certified contractor is not required, DEP has a list of certified storage tank companies available on its website at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Storage Tanks. For tips on how to hire a contractor visit the PA Attorney General's Office website at [www.attorneygeneral.gov](http://www.attorneygeneral.gov) and the Federal Trade Commission's website at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov). The DEP fact sheet titled *Leaking Underground Storage Tanks: Controlling Cleanup Costs* (Doc. #2620-FS-DEP1610) also provides some basic guidelines for finding a contractor and controlling cleanup costs. This fact sheet can be found on the DEP website at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Storage Tank Cleanup.

### ***Cleanup Requirements***

Heating oil releases must be cleaned up to state environmental cleanup standards. The cleanup standards for soil, groundwater and surface water are found in the Land Recycling Regulations (25 PA Code Chapter 250, *Administration of Land Recycling Program*). If the cleanup meets these standards and the tank owner completes the administrative and reporting requirements of the Land Recycling Program, DEP will grant a release of liability for the cleanup. A release of liability ensures that DEP will not compel the owner to perform additional environmental cleanup and can be extremely useful if the property may be offered for sale in the future. It will demonstrate to prospective buyers and lenders that the heating oil release has been cleaned up to state standards and that no additional environmental cleanup is required. Information on cleanup requirements and the Land Recycling Program is available from the local DEP regional office and on the DEP website at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Land Recycling.

DEP will not grant a release of liability if environmental contamination is not cleaned up or if the cleanup does not meet all of the requirements of the Land Recycling Program. The owner will be required to disclose any contamination remaining on the property to prospective buyers when the property is offered for sale, and DEP may take enforcement action to compel a cleanup and/or to ensure that the cleanup standards are met.

### ***Oil Recovery and Tank System Closure***

Any free-standing heating oil should be recovered, and the cleanup contractor or heating oil distributor may pump the unused oil out of the tank and fuel lines. If an aboveground or underground tank or heating oil line must be removed (e.g. due to corrosion or structural failure), it

should be thoroughly cleaned inside prior to removal and disposal. Disposal of the tank and other wastes must be in accordance with DEP waste management regulations.

Underground tanks that are difficult or costly to remove (e.g. due to obstructions) may be closed in place by cleaning and filling with a non-shrinking, inert solid material, such as sand, gravel or concrete, prior to re-grading. This will prevent subsidence and/or heaving after the tank is closed out. It is important to remove the fill pipe whenever a tank is removed or closed in place. Removing the fill pipe will ensure that fuel cannot be mistakenly delivered.

Check with the local municipality and fire marshal to see if there are any local regulations, such as permit or inspection requirements, that must be followed when removing a tank and piping system or closing a tank in place.

### ***Soil, Groundwater and Surface Water***

Contaminated soil that is removed during cleanup must be tested prior to disposal. Disposal of contaminated soil must be in accordance with DEP waste management regulations. Contaminated soil stockpiled on site prior to disposal should be placed on a liner of plastic or other impermeable material and covered with tarps or plastic sheeting. Any soil remaining in or on the ground following cleanup must meet the cleanup standards found in the Land Recycling Regulations. The contractor should test the soil to make sure that the cleanup standards have been met.

If heating oil has contaminated groundwater or surface water bodies, the cleanup should be closely coordinated with the DEP regional office. Groundwater cleanups may require the installation of monitoring or extraction wells and treatment systems. Surface water cleanups may require the use of absorbent booms, oil separators or other devices to recover the oil and clean the water.

### ***Vapors***

Heating oil contamination in soil and/or groundwater may result in vapors migrating into the home or into adjacent homes or structures. Exposure to these vapors may cause health problems. If vapors or odors persist or have migrated to adjacent buildings, more extensive environmental cleanup or specialized vapor mitigation measures may be needed.

### **Help is Available**

The local DEP regional office is available to answer any questions or concerns regarding environmental cleanup. A program is also available to assist owners of leaking **underground** heating oil tanks with the cost of environmental cleanup. Information on this program may be found at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Heating Oil Cleanup Reimbursement, or by contacting the DEP Site Remediation Division at 717-787-0886, email [tankcleanup@pa.gov](mailto:tankcleanup@pa.gov).

### **Preventing Releases**

The best way to minimize the adverse effects and costs of heating oil releases is to prevent them from occurring. Information on preventing heating oil releases can be found in the DEP fact sheet *Tips for Residential Heating Oil Tank Owners* (Doc. #2630-FS-DEP1681). This fact sheet is available at [www.dep.pa.gov](http://www.dep.pa.gov), search term: Home Heating Oil.

## DEP Regional Offices

**To report an environmental emergency, please contact DEP regional offices between 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. and 1-800-541-2050 between 4 p.m. - 8 a.m.**

<p><b>Southeast Region</b>                  2 E. Main St.                  Norristown, PA 19401-4915                  Main Telephone: 484-250-5900                  Storage Tanks Program: 484-250-5960  <b>Counties:</b> Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia</p>	<p><b>Northeast Region</b>                  2 Public Square                  Wilkes-Barre, PA 18701-1915                  Main Telephone: 570-826-2511                  Storage Tanks Program: 570-826-2511  <b>Counties:</b> Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming</p>
<p><b>South-central Region</b>                  909 Elmerton Ave.                  Harrisburg, PA 17110-8200                  Main Telephone: 717-705-4700                  Storage Tanks Program: 717-705-4705  <b>Counties:</b> Adams, Bedford, Berks, Blair, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Perry and York</p>	<p><b>North-central Region</b>                  208 W. Third St.                  Williamsport, PA 17701-6448                  Main Telephone: 570-327-3636                  Storage Tanks Program: 570-327-3636  <b>Counties:</b> Bradford, Cameron, Centre, Clearfield, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga and Union</p>
<p><b>Southwest Region</b>                  400 Waterfront Drive                  Pittsburgh, PA 15222-4745                  Main Telephone: 412-442-4000                  Storage Tanks Program: 412-442-4091  <b>Counties:</b> Allegheny, Beaver, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Somerset, Washington and Westmoreland</p>	<p><b>Northwest Region</b>                  230 Chestnut St.                  Meadville, PA 16335-3481                  Main Telephone: 814-332-6945                  Storage Tanks Program: 814-332-6648  <b>Counties:</b> Armstrong, Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Venango and Warren</p>