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A quarterly Newsletter by Trench Drain Supply (www.TrenchDrainSupply.com)

Oil-Sensing Elevator Sump Pumps

Protecting Plumbing Systems and the Environment

Elevator pits are a unique and often misunderstood part of a building's plumbing and mechanical infrastructure. Located below grade and directly beneath elevator cabs, these pits are prone to water intrusion from groundwater, cleaning activities, and fire suppression runoff. At the same time, they are exposed to lubricating oils and hydraulic fluids from elevator equipment. This combination creates a high-risk condition: contaminated discharge entering the sanitary or storm drainage system.

Oil-sensing elevator sump pump systems exist to address this exact risk. Properly designed and installed, they protect public infrastructure, comply with plumbing codes, and prevent costly environmental violations. This article explains how oil-sensing sump pumps work, why they are required, and what the **International Plumbing Code (IPC)** expects from designers and installers.

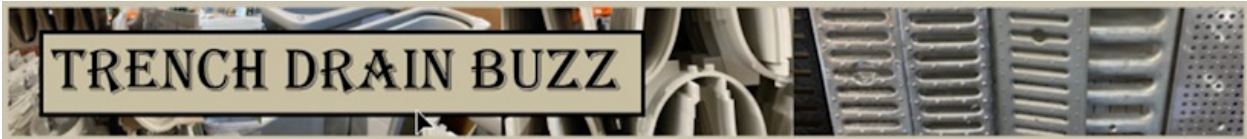
Why Elevator Pits Require Special Sump Pump Design

Unlike typical equipment pits or floor drains, elevator pits are directly associated with mechanical systems that use lubricants and, in some cases, hydraulic oil. Even modern traction elevators can introduce oil through guide rail lubrication, bearing grease, or maintenance activities. Over time, small leaks accumulate and float on the surface of water in the pit.

A conventional sump pump does not discriminate between clean water and contaminated water. If oil is present, the pump will discharge it along with the water—often directly into the sanitary sewer system. This is unacceptable from both a regulatory and environmental standpoint.

Oil-sensing elevator sump pump systems are specifically designed to:

- Remove water from elevator pits
- Detect the presence of oil



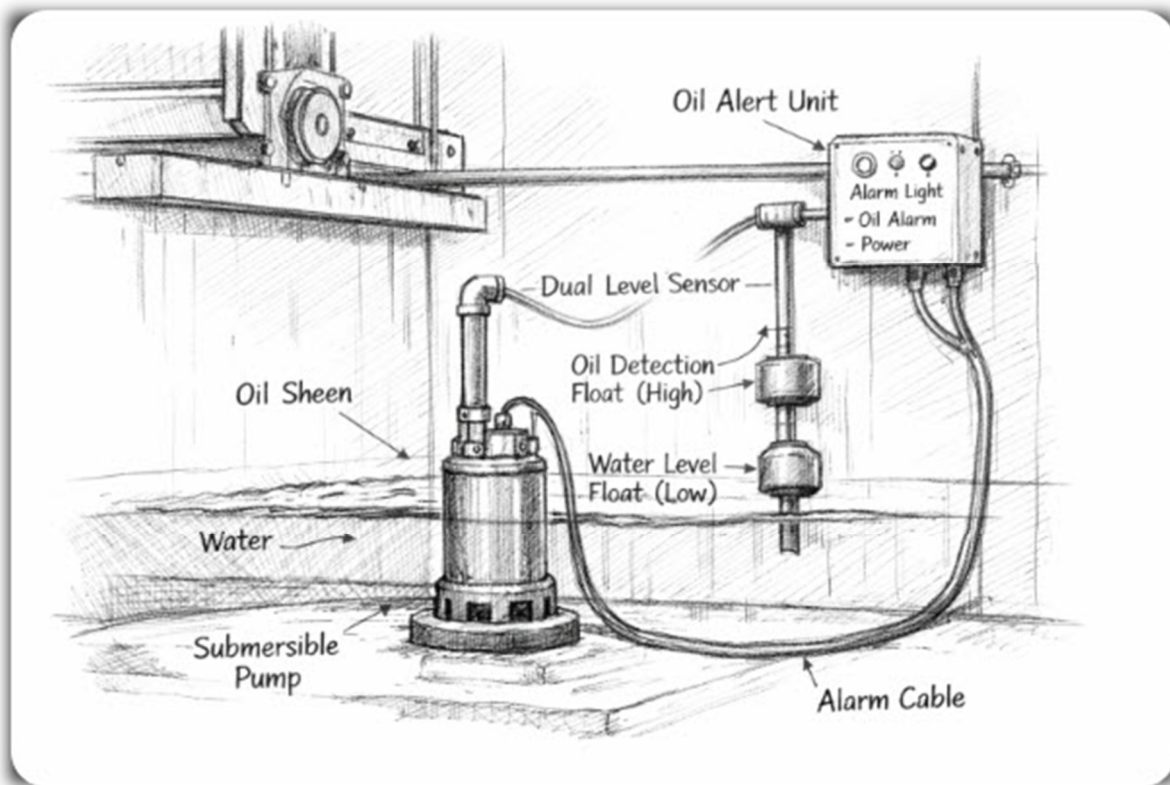
1/14/2026 Issue 3

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- Prevent oil-contaminated discharge
- Alert building personnel when oil conditions exist

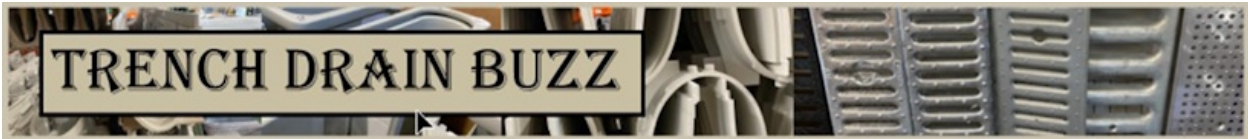
System Components and How They Work

The illustration below provides a clear conceptual view of a typical oil-sensing elevator sump pump system. While manufacturers vary in execution, most compliant systems share the same core components:



Submersible Sump Pump

The pump is installed at the bottom of the elevator pit and is responsible for removing water under normal operating conditions. These pumps are typically corrosion-resistant and rated for intermittent duty.



1/14/2026 Issue 3

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Dual-Level Float System

Two independent floats are commonly used:

- **Low-level float (water level):** Activates the pump during normal groundwater or washdown conditions.
- **High-level float (oil detection):** Signals the presence of an abnormal condition, often tied to oil detection logic.

Oil Detection Sensor or Float

Oil detection is usually accomplished via a dedicated float or sensor calibrated to respond to hydrocarbons floating on water. Because oil is lighter than water, it forms a surface layer (“oil sheen”) that the sensor can reliably detect.

Control Panel / Oil Alert Unit

The control panel interprets signals from the floats and sensors. When oil is detected, the system may:

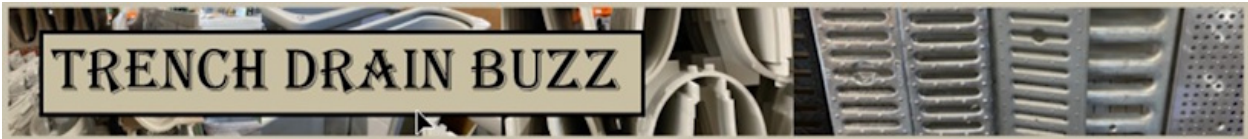
- Disable the pump to prevent discharge
- Activate an audible and/or visual alarm
- Send a signal to a building management system (where provided)

Alarm and Notification

Alarms are a critical component. An oil-sensing sump pump is not just a mechanical device—it is a monitoring system. The alarm prompts maintenance staff to investigate, remove oil manually, and correct the source of contamination.

What the International Plumbing Code Requires

The **International Plumbing Code (IPC)** addresses elevator sump pits due to their potential to discharge oil-contaminated water. While local amendments vary, the IPC establishes a baseline expectation for protection of the drainage system.



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Key IPC principles include:

Separation of Oil and Water

The IPC requires that **oil-contaminated liquids not be discharged into the sanitary sewer system** without proper separation or treatment. Elevator pits fall under this requirement due to the likelihood of oil presence.

Indirect Waste and Special Waste Considerations

Elevator pit drainage is often classified as “special waste.” The IPC allows discharge only when provisions are made to prevent oil from entering the drainage system. This is commonly achieved through oil-sensing sump pump systems or oil separators approved for the application.

Automatic Shutoff or Alarm

Where oil is present or suspected, the IPC expects either:

- Automatic prevention of oil discharge, or
- A monitored system that alerts personnel before discharge occurs

Oil-sensing sump pumps satisfy this requirement by stopping pump operation or triggering alarms when oil is detected.

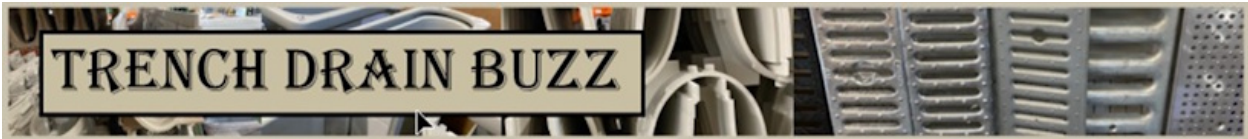
Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) Approval

The IPC intentionally leaves final approval to the **Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ)**. This allows local plumbing officials to account for environmental regulations, sewer authority requirements, and regional enforcement practices.

Remember to Check with local Authorities Having Jurisdiction before executing any design.

Design and Installation Best Practices

Even when an oil-sensing sump pump is specified, performance depends heavily on proper design and installation. Best practices include:



1/14/2026 Issue 3

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- **Dedicated Discharge Piping:** Elevator sump pumps should discharge through piping clearly identified and routed per local code requirements.
- **Accessible Sensors:** Oil detection floats and probes must be accessible for inspection, cleaning, and replacement.
- **Clear Alarm Visibility:** Alarms should be located where building staff will notice them immediately, not buried in a remote mechanical room.
- **Redundant Safeguards:** Some jurisdictions prefer systems that both disable the pump and activate alarms when oil is detected.
- **Maintenance Planning:** Oil-sensing systems require periodic testing. A maintenance protocol should be established at turnover.

Common Field Issues and Failures

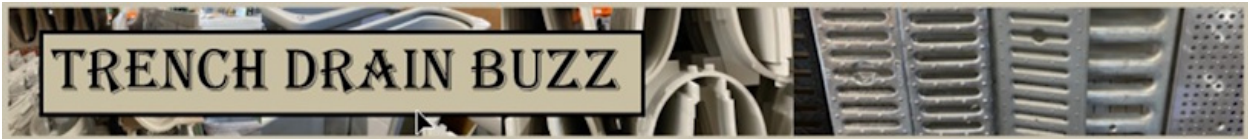
From a practical standpoint, the most common problems seen in the field are not product failures, but **system failures caused by poor coordination:**

- Pumps wired to bypass oil sensors
- Alarms disabled due to nuisance trips
- Sensors coated with debris and rendered ineffective
- Designs that ignore local sewer authority requirements

These issues can lead to violations, fines, and costly retrofits—often long after the elevator is operational.

Why Oil-Sensing Systems Matter

Beyond code compliance, oil-sensing elevator sump pumps serve a broader purpose. They protect municipal infrastructure, reduce environmental impact, and provide building owners with early warning of mechanical problems in elevator systems.



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In many cases, an oil alarm is the first indication of a failing seal, worn guide rail lubrication system, or improper maintenance practice. Addressing the issue early can prevent elevator downtime and expensive repairs.

Conclusion

Oil-sensing elevator sump pumps are no longer a specialty item—they are a standard expectation in modern building design. By understanding how these systems work and how the **International Plumbing Code** approaches oil-contaminated drainage, engineers and contractors can design compliant, reliable solutions that protect both buildings and the environment.

When properly specified, installed, and maintained, oil-sensing sump pump systems transform elevator pits from a regulatory liability into a controlled, monitored component of the building's plumbing system.

Remember to Check with local Authorities Having Jurisdiction before executing any design.
