

Your Watershed
By the Russian River Watershed Association

Talking Trash: The Lowdown on Litter

While driving along many of our local roads, you may have noticed a trail of litter either scattered along the way or intentionally dumped. Whether it's plastic bags, cardboard containers, cigarette butts or old couches they are an eyesore to our community and a threat to our creeks and rivers. Significant rainstorms fill our street gutters, drainage channels and ditches with high flowing water that can carry litter to the nearest creek. Once in the creek, the Styrofoam cups and plastic bags begin their watery journey to the Russian River and then out to the Pacific Ocean.

In recent articles on the so-called "Great Pacific Garbage Patch", it was reported that an enormous island of trash twice the size of Texas is floating in the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Hawaii (San Francisco Chronicle – October 19, 2007). The floating trash heap is reportedly 80 percent plastic and weighs more than 3.5 million tons. One of the dangers of trash in the waterways is that fish and birds can and will consume these churned up bits of litter mistaking it for food. Unfortunately for them, they cannot digest the litter and it can harm or even decimate their populations.

To remedy the situation of litter along our roads and preventing it from entering our waterways, it would be helpful if everyone would take a few minutes to pick up any trash near your home (even though it's not your trash). Other ways to pitch in include:

- **Put a lid on it!** Keep trash in a bag and secure trash bin lids. This action will prevent bins from blowing open in storms and blowing trash into the gutters and storm drains.
- **Strap your load!** Anything leaving a vehicle and landing on the roadside is littering. When transporting garbage or debris as many contractors do, use a tarp strapped down to hold any small pieces of trash in place in the load while traveling on roads. Remember – littering is illegal and drivers will be fined accordingly.
- **Reuse and Recycle.** Limit your use of plastics when possible. Utilize a reusable bag when shopping for groceries. Also, many mailing locations will accept used Styrofoam peanuts.
- **No butts on the street!** Cigarette butts are the most commonly littered item in the United States and can take up to five years to decompose. Put your butt in a proper ash receptacle, not on the street.
- **Keep it clean!** Perform daily garbage cleanups at the end of the day on construction sites.
- **Volunteer!** There are multiple creek and river cleanup days throughout the watershed. Check community calendars and city websites for scheduled cleanups.

This article was authored by Janice Gilligan of the Sonoma County Permit & Resource Management Department. RRWA is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.