



Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA November Environmental Column

Dirty Streets + Rain = Dirty Creeks, River and Ocean

Have you ever stopped to see how dirty some streets and parking lots are? Have you ever peered into one of those storm drain inlets along the curb? Whatever you see is on its way to your local creeks and river, once it rains. For the most part, there is nothing to filter out trash, dirt, yard waste, cigarette butts, oil, fertilizers, pesticides and many other pollutants, such as small metal particles like copper and zinc from vehicles, because stormwater travels directly from streets, parking lots and other hardened or impervious surfaces to our Russian River. YUCK!

Our urban areas have been designed to rapidly evacuate water from rooftops, roads and parking lots, with the goal of avoiding urban flooding. Unfortunately, this design also transports pollution via curbs, gutters and storm drains, to our local creeks, our river and ultimately our oceans.

Where do these pollutants come from that flush from our streets when it rains? They come from our everyday activities, such as driving, landscape maintenance (or lack of), construction, pest control, washing cars and many other activities. It is rare that someone intentionally dumps pollutants directly into storm drains, although it sadly does happen. Most pollutants come in tiny quantities across entire urban areas that are all connected via the storm drain system to the river.

There are also misconceptions about substances that many people do not believe are pollution, such as dirt, leaves, lawn clippings and pet waste. Although creeks and rivers have dirt bottoms and are lined with trees which drop leaves, our storm drain systems collect these things from vast areas well beyond the creek corridors, contributing hundreds of times what would be natural. Too much of any substance will create problems. Too much sediment harms fish and too much decomposing plant debris in our river can depress oxygen levels and possibly suffocate aquatic life.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has identified stormwater and urban runoff as one of the most significant sources of water pollution in the country and a serious threat to aquatic life and habitat. Pollution in stormwater runoff threatens the water quality in the Russian River.

What can we do? As residents of the watershed, we all need to take ownership of the problem. Citizens are the first line of defense in tackling stormwater pollution - you and I can make a difference with simple acts. Picking up after our pets, finding a garbage can for our litter, maintaining our cars so they don't leak fluids, not washing off our driveways into the streets, sweeping up curb areas rather than blowing the debris somewhere else, all add up to cleaner streets and a cleaner river.



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The good news is, to prevent this problem in new construction, our local cities have updated building regulations to change the way we build by breaking the direct connection from roads and parking lots to our creeks. Often this is accomplished by routing water from paved areas to landscaping designed to temporarily retain water, so that plants and naturally occurring microbes in the soil filter out or capture pollutants, reducing pollution to our creeks.

What about the fact that most urban areas are already built and constantly conveying any pollutants on the ground to the river? That's where you and I come into the picture. Since the pollution is so diffuse, there is only so much our cities can do about it. They respond with street sweeping, using vacuum trucks to clean debris out of storm drain inlets, and other efforts to reduce pollutants. These activities are all paid for by the community, so the dirtier our streets, the higher our bill ... and the dirtier our river – not a winning equation!

If we all pitch in and make small efforts to keep our streets clean, it will make a huge difference for our local creeks, the Russian River and our oceans! Find out more about stormwater programs in Russian River watershed communities at - <http://www.rrwatershed.org/stormwater.html>.

This article was guest authored by Don McEnhill, Executive Director of Russian Riverkeeper, for the Russian River Watershed Association. 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.



If our streets are dirty, then our local creeks, the Russian River and the ocean will be dirty too.