



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – February 2016

Toilets are NOT Trash Cans

Sewers are designed for a specific purpose of disposing of human waste and have been extremely effective in reducing/eliminating water-borne diseases. Sanitation, in fact, was rated as the greatest medical advance in 150 years by a poll conducted in 2007 by the British Medical Journal. Other materials, beside human waste and toilet paper, should not be flushed down the toilet or sink drains. These materials can clog the pipes and disrupt the wastewater treatment process. The clogging can back up sewer pipes and damage homes and businesses as well as drive up sewer maintenance costs and increase sewer bills. Toilet paper breaks down and is not a problem. Other materials do not break down and are problematic for the pipes and pumps in the treatment of the wastewater.

Most prevalent in recent years has been the flushing of medicines and “flushable” products down the toilet. Medicines lead to dissolved chemicals traveling through the sewer system and into our waterways where they can pollute and disrupt these ecosystems. “Flushable” products, such as wipes, do not degrade as fast nor as easily as toilet paper. Currently, there are not yet any State or Federal standards for “flushable” products, so products labeled “flushable” or “septic safe” have no regulated definitions.

What you can do

Most of the materials that you may be tempted to flush can be disposed of in the trash. Medicines can be disposed of at pharmacies and police stations that participate in the Safe Medicines Disposal Program (www.safemedicinedisposal.org/). Food waste can be composted or put in green yard-waste bins. Fats, oils, and grease should be poured into a disposable container, cooled and put in the trash. Fats, oils, and grease are especially problematic in sewers as they thicken and combine with other materials, forming blockages in the sewers that commonly cause back-ups. “Disposable” wipes should be thrown in the trash. An option for reducing the waste of these wipes is to use sponges or rags that can be washed and reused. Hazardous chemical products, such as antifreeze, batteries or motor oil, should be taken to local household hazardous waste disposal sites. For information regarding disposal of hazardous materials, including local disposal centers, visit recyclenow.org for Sonoma County and mendorecycle.org for Mendocino County.

ITEMS THAT SHOULD NEVER BE FLUSHED:

- “Flushable” items (cleaning wipes, toilet bowl scrub pads, disposable mops, diapers)
- Tampons, tampon applicators, sanitary napkins, condoms
- Medications, vitamins, and supplements
- Fats, oils, and grease
- Food (bones, apples cores, coffee grounds, nutshells)
- Paper towels, napkins, facial tissues
- Disposable diapers and baby wipes
- Wash rags, cloth, clothing
- Kitty litter, aquarium gravel, bedding material for small animals



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- Pet waste and pet waste bags (even bags labeled “flushable”)
- Plastic (of any kind)
- Hair
- Syringes
- Poisons and hazardous waste

By only flushing human waste and toilet paper down the toilet, you can keep the costs of conveying and treating wastewater down, avoid costly damage to homes and businesses, and help protect our environment.

This article was authored by Craig Scott of the City of Cotati on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rwatershed.org) 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.