



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – January 2015

Think before flushing!

Toilets and sewer systems are designed to transport and dispose of specific materials. The pipes that connect your home to the sewer or a septic system are only wide enough to transport three things: water, toilet paper and human waste. When other materials are flushed down the drain, they can get stuck and cause damage, from clogged drains to sewer backups and overflows; and these materials can create maintenance challenges for pumping out septic tanks. Sewer back-ups are not only smelly; they can damage homes and businesses resulting in expensive repairs. If a spill leaks into the environment, the negative effects can be extensive. All these complications result in damaged systems, which increase the City's sewer maintenance, repair costs, and your sewer bill!

Recently, the prime culprits in clogging sewer systems have been “flushable” products. Contrary to their name, these products should not be flushed, as they do not degrade as fast or as easily as toilet paper. The only truly flushable item is toilet paper, which readily disintegrates in water, making it easy to travel through sewer drains. Currently, there are no State or Federal standards for “flushable” products, so products labeled “flushable” or “septic safe” have no regulated definitions.

Additionally, disposing of chemical products through the toilet leads to dissolved chemicals traveling through the sewer system and into aquatic environments, where they can pollute and disrupt these ecosystems.

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 items (bones, apple 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 such as hamsters
- Pet waste and pet waste bags (even bags labeled “flushable”)
- Plastic (of any kind)
- Cotton swabs and balls, bandages
- Dental floss
- Chewing gum
- Cosmetics
- Pets (goldfish, hamsters, gerbils)
- Hair
- Syringes
- Poisons and hazardous waste



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What you can do

Most of these listed materials can be discarded in the trash, though there are some that have more specific disposal methods. Medicines and pharmaceuticals can be disposed of at pharmacies and law enforcement stations that participate in the Safe Medicines Disposal Program (safemedicinedisposal.org). Food waste can be composted or taken to a food recycling program. Fats, oil and grease can be poured into a disposable container, cooled and then put in the garbage. Used cooking oils can sometimes be made into biodiesel. For more information, see www.rrwatershed.org/node/139. More hazardous chemical products, such as antifreeze, batteries or motor oil, should be taken to local household hazardous waste disposal sites. For information regarding disposal and recycling options of the materials listed, including local disposal centers, visit recyclenow.org for Sonoma County and mendorecycle.org for Mendocino County. If the item cannot be reused, recycled or composted, then it can be disposed of in the garbage. In addition, you can avoid producing waste by cleaning with a sponge or a rag that can be reused instead of purchasing and using “flushable” items.

By flushing only appropriate materials (water, toilet paper and human waste), you can help keep wastewater conveyance and treatment costs down, keep sewer lines clear, and help protect the environment.

This article was authored by Craig Scott and Lauren Salberg of the City of Cloverdale on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.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.