



## Russian River Watershed Association

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### RRWA June Environmental Column

#### Checking up on our Russian River Watershed Smarts!

Every year community groups, public agencies, and individuals invest time, money, and ingenuity to take care of the Russian River Watershed. Most of these efforts target water quality and habitat improvement, and annually cost thousands of hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Gauging the effectiveness of these efforts is crucial to their success. In 2005 and 2009, the Russian River Watershed Association (RRWA) hired the Windsor based public relations firm, Data Instincts, to carry out a phone survey to analyze knowledge and behavior of residents in the Russian River watershed regarding specific household activities, like car washing and picking up pet waste, and about watershed awareness. The 2009 results were compared to the 2005 results to see if public outreach has worked. These surveys revealed that most Russian River Watershed residents know a great deal about where they live and care about the environment. They also reveal areas that need to improve, indicating where agencies and special interest groups will focus future outreach efforts. Here are some of the survey results.

Between 2005 and 2009, more residents have grown in understanding where storm water goes. In 2009, more than half of respondents correctly understood that water entering storm drains goes directly into a creek, compared to only 42% in 2005. However, 21% simply don't know where storm drain water goes, which is a slight improvement over 28% in 2005. In both years, about a third of watershed residents understand that they live in a watershed. Though somewhat lacking in knowledge, people do feel empowered - when asked if they think that they personally can have any effect on protecting the water quality in the Russian River or its tributaries, 76% said they could.

In the 2005 survey, car washing and yard fertilizing emerged as areas of greatest concern for watershed health because a large percentage of the watershed population engaged in these activities – many in ways that were not environmentally sound. In 2009, the number of home car washers decreased slightly. Those washing on an unpaved surface, which is safer for the environment, increased to 23% from 15% in 2005. This indicates that our community understands that using a commercial car wash is better for the environment, and that home car-washing on paved surfaces allows pollutants to enter the storm drain and harms the environment! In 2009, fewer residents reported using fertilizer on their lawns or gardens. In both surveys, about a quarter of those using fertilizers allow runoff to occur on occasion, so this is an area to focus further outreach efforts.

Resident behavior remained very good between 2005 and 2009 related to dog waste and yard waste disposal. In 2009, more dog owners picked up their dog's waste while on a walk, but there was little change in the percentage that pick up pet waste from their yards. No one in either survey year reported disposing of dog waste into storm drains. In both study years, of 75% of residents who perform yard work, no one disposed of yard waste in the storm drain system.



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Also relatively unchanged between survey years was motor oil disposal. Both years indicate that 20% of the population changes motor oil at home, with almost no disposal of oil into a storm drain.

A troubling result from the 2009 survey is that of 17% of participants who maintain home pools or spas, 12% drain directly into storm drains. These measurements have not changed since 2005.

Most of the news is good – Russian River residents are getting smarter about how to live within our watershed. RRWA will continue to track the effect of our outreach programs to keep the message on target and the pollutants out of our river! For more information on RRWA programs, visit [www.rrwatershed.org](http://www.rrwatershed.org).

*This article was authored by Reg Cullen, of Sonoma County PRMD, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA ([www.rrwatershed.org](http://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.*