



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – June 2015 The Truth Behind Washing Your Car

Public perception of professional car washes during a time of drought has often led to a call for restrictions on their water use. However, professional car washes are usually the most environmentally friendly method of cleaning a car. During this current drought in California, all residents should be conserving at home, including when cleaning their car. Increasing the time between washings is the first step to saving water. When the car *has* to be washed, take it to a professional car wash to save water and prevent pollution.

Water Savings and Environmental Health

Professional car washes not only save water, often using only half the amount of water that a home washing uses, they are also required by law to properly dispose of their waste water. Most car washes recycle their water by cleaning it and use it again. All commercial car washes are required to dispose of their dirty water properly, in the sanitary sewer. Waste water in the sanitary sewer gets treated at a wastewater treatment plant, whereas homeowners who wash their car outside often let their soapy water run into the storm drain, which drains directly to our creeks without being cleaned. Soapy water is a source of pollution for our local creeks and causes harm to fish and other wildlife, even if the soap is biodegradable.

Here is a summary of the differences between a professional car wash and a home car wash:

	Professional Car Wash	Home Car Wash
Approx. Water Use	15 – 70 gallons per wash package*	150 gallons per 15 minutes (garden hose without a shutoff)
Water Recycling Available?	Yes	No
Proper Disposal of Soapy Water?	Yes	No

* Not necessarily all potable water. This could be up to 100% recycled water.

There are three types of car washes: self-serve, conveyor, and in-bay automatic. Self-serve allows customers to wash their cars themselves. A wand dispenses water and cleaner at varying rates. Self-serve style car washes often use the least amount of water, about 12 gallons per wash. The conveyor style car wash pulls the car along a conveyor and the wands activate as the car advances. This type of car wash uses approximately 44 gallons per package. An in-bay automatic car wash is when the driver pulls into a bay and parks and the car wash wands circulate around the car. This type of car wash uses about 72 gallons per package. These numbers, as reported by the International Car Wash Association, are approximate only, but all are less than the amount of water used while washing your car at home.

Above and Beyond

All professional car washes save water and prevent water pollution compared to home car washes and now professional car washes have the opportunity to showcase their commitment to an even higher level of



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sustainability. In California, a Green Business certification is available to businesses that exercise a high level of water and energy conservation, waste reduction, and pollution prevention techniques. Using low-toxicity soaps, compact florescent light bulbs, paper products with recycled content, low flow sinks and toilets, and many other practices are guaranteed at Green Business certified car washes. For more information on the Sonoma County Green Business Program, visit www.sonomagreen.org. In Mendocino County, call the Recycling Hotline (707-468-9704) for more information. All California certified Green Businesses can be found at www.greenbusinessca.org.

When it comes time to wash your car, make the environmentally smart choice and take it to a professional car wash.

This article was authored by Claire Nordlie of Sonoma County Water Agency, 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.