

Your Watershed

By: The Russian River Watershed Association

Used Motor Oil: A Preventable Pollutant

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, used motor oil is the largest single source of pollution in America's rivers. It takes very little oil to cause real problems. A single quart of oil can make an oil slick extending over a couple of acres of water! This film of oil blocks oxygen and sunlight, disrupting natural ecosystems. It is also toxic, containing trace amounts of heavy metals like cadmium and lead, and carcinogens such as benzene.

If you change your own oil, you probably know that it's easy and convenient to properly dispose of used oil. Hopefully you also know that oil filters must also be recycled. There's a good reason why it is illegal to put used oil or filters in the trash: Once in the landfill, oil becomes part of the a liquid called leachate. Leachate percolates down to the landfill liner and can eventually find its way into groundwater.

There are over 50 locations in Sonoma County where used oil and filters can be dropped off for free. Most residents also have free pickup available from their garbage haulers. There are also drop-off locations throughout Mendocino County. Sonoma County information is available in the Recycling Guide located under "R" in the AT&T Yellow Pages, or at www.recyclenow.org. For Mendocino information call (707) 468-9710, or check www.mendorecycle.org. There is also a searchable database of collection locations statewide at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/UsedOil.

Even if you don't change your own oil, you may be adding to the oil pollution problem if your car drips or burns a little oil. Remember that a little oil pollutes a lot of water! Oil from drips or condensing from automobile exhaust gets washed by the rain into storm drains and straight into waterways. Maintaining your car well not only helps save you money by improving gas efficiency and reducing costly repairs: it also helps air quality and water quality.

Oil also enters waterways when people wash their cars. You can avoid this by never washing your car on a paved surface where the runoff goes into storm drains. Direct the runoff onto a lawn or other ground where it can be filtered by soil and microorganisms. Better yet, use a car wash- these facilities are plumbed to remove the oil and send the waste water to a treatment plant.

Most people probably change their oil more often than necessary. Remember that producing oil causes enormous environmental damage, so using less makes a positive difference. For information on reducing the frequency of oil changing, including a list of manufacturers' recommendations for many car models, check out www.3000milemyth.org.

This article was authored by Connie Cloak, contractor to the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency on behalf of RRWA. 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.