



RUSSIAN RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

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RRWA Environmental Column – August 2010:

Wash Your Car Responsibly - or Don't Do It At All!

A dirty car should be sported like a badge of honor: "I conserved water by not washing my car." It may also be an unwitting act of environmental kindness: it's one less car washed in a driveway or street – a seemingly innocent chore that unfortunately sends toxins straight to our creeks.

Is car washing bad for the environment? It depends on how it's done. Car washing in the driveway or street mixes soapy water with dirt, oil, gasoline, exhaust residue, and brake pad dust from your car. This nasty concoction then flows down the gutter and into the storm drain. Unlike household wastewater which goes to sewers or septic systems and is treated before being reused or released into waterways, car wash water from "at home" car washing goes to the storm drain and into the local creek or river – untreated. The toxins harm fish and plants in our waterways and damage our aquatic ecosystems. Even "biodegradable" or "environmentally-friendly" car soap poses problems: as the soap degrades, it uses up oxygen needed by aquatic life.

How can you have a clean ride while still protecting the environment? You can clean your car by regularly wiping the exterior with a wet cloth or paper towel without soap, or use "waterless carwash" products which are now available. If your car really needs a wash, take it to a commercial car wash facility, which is required by Federal law to drain the wastewater into the sewer system to be treated. Commercial car wash facilities also have high-pressure nozzles and pumps that minimize water use. Many also recycle and re-use the rinse water.

If you must wash your car at home, follow these steps for the most environmentally-responsible wash:

- Choose vegetable- or citrus-based soap that does not contain phosphates, chlorine, nitrates, or ammonia.
- Wash your car on your lawn or over gravel so that the washwater can be absorbed and neutralized in soil instead of flowing into the storm drain system.
- If you have to wash on the pavement, divert the water into nearby landscaping, grass, or gravel with rolled up towels or a length of hose.
- Vacuum car mats or shake them into a trash can, not onto the pavement.
- Don't use acid-based wheel cleaners or engine degreasers.
- Use a spray nozzle with an automatic shut off nozzle.
- Wring sponges and wash rags into buckets, not onto the pavement.
- After you're done washing, sop up remaining sudsy puddles with towels.
- Empty buckets into sinks or toilets so the dirty wash water goes to the sanitary sewer system.

Thinking about a car wash fundraiser for your school, church or sports group? Unfortunately, while car washes may help organizations, they hurt our waterways. Instead, consider asking a local commercial car wash if your group can sell coupons or tokens to their establishment. The car wash company may even give your group a special rate and/or help publicize your fundraiser. Or check with a local self-serve car wash business and ask to use one of their stalls to conduct the fundraiser.

If you must raise funds with a car wash, follow the same rules for home car washing above, and select a site where the wash water can soak into grass, gravel, or be diverted to nearby landscaping. If your only choice is to have the car wash on pavement, contact your municipality or county to find out if you are allowed to seal the storm drains for your carwash, or to discuss other options. The County of Sonoma Storm Water Program has details on how to block off a storm drain inlet and make and use a carwash kit on their website at <http://www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/sw/pp-home-carwash.htm>. In Mendocino County, call the Recycling Hotline (707 468-9704) for more information.

This article was authored by Eydie Tacata with the City of Rohnert Park on behalf of the Russian River Watershed Association. 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.