



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – February 2012 Cigarette Butts - A Small but Harmful Pollutant

Ask anyone who volunteers to do litter cleanup at parks, alongside roads, or on beaches, “What’s the most common item you pick up?” Along with beverage containers and food wrappers, cigarette butts are always at the top of the list.

A cigarette flicked onto the ground seems like such a small bit of trash, hardly worth the bother of putting in a trash can or ash tray. However, though cigarette butts *are* small by themselves, they are littered by the *millions*. In 2009, the City of San Francisco reported that a quarter of the litter picked up on that City’s streets was cigarette butts. That same year, a nationwide survey of roadsides, conducted by Keep America Beautiful, found that 38% of the litter collected was cigarette butts.

The bio-degradable myth

Cigarette butt litter is ugly, that’s a given. But, what many smokers and non-smokers alike may not know is that cigarette butts are also harmful to wildlife. Many people hold the misconception that cigarette butts are bio-degradable, so it’s *okay* to litter them. This is not so! Cigarette butts are made of synthetic fibers (plastics) that can choke or block the digestive tracks of birds or other wildlife. Cigarette butts also contain various harmful chemicals. When soaking in water (think the Russian River or your favorite neighborhood creek) they release toxins such as nicotine, benzene and heavy metals. A big enough concentration of cigarette butts in our waterways can cause a toxic soup that harms the fish and other life in our creeks and the Russian River.

As a volunteer for the Russian River cleanup, paddling along collecting beer cans and water bottles, plastic bags and fishing wire, I looked up to see a man in the canoe ahead of me breathe out a puff of smoke and then toss a spent cigarette butt high into the air, watching it arch back down and into the river. Thankfully, not many people *directly* litter into our waterways. However, the cigarette butts that are tossed from our cars, dropped along sidewalks, and stomped out alongside walking trails – these same cigarette butts are carried by the next big rain into our storm drains, into our creeks, and then into the Russian River. Every bit of sidewalk, road, and trail in our watershed is a pathway for rain to carry litter straight to the Russian River and, ultimately, all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

What to do?

Take responsibility for your cigarette butts. They *are* litter and they do harm wildlife and pollute our waters. If you’re driving when you smoke, put your cigarette butts out in your car’s ashtray rather than tossing them out the window. If you’re out and about without an ashtray, stamp out the ember and carry the cigarette butt out with you. If you’re an employer or business owner, consider installing



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ashtrays outside where your employees or customers smoke, and post information, such as this article, on how to properly dispose of cigarette butts.

If you can, volunteer to do litter cleanup in your neighborhood, the Russian River, or our coastal beaches. And when you see people littering cigarette butts, let them know that cigarette smoking is harmful to more than their lungs: the butts they toss away pollute our environment and can kill wildlife.

This article was authored by Cristina Goulart for the Town of Windsor, 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.



The journey of a cigarette butt: from roads to rivers and beaches