



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

RRWA Environmental Column – March 2012
The Storm Drain is Not the Sewer –
Reducing your personal impact on our Russian River watershed

What is a storm-drain?

Storm drains in Russian River watershed communities are separate from the sewer system. The storm water from these drains flows through natural and manmade culverts and drainage channels, eventually reaching our surface waters, including local creeks, the Russian River and ultimately, the Pacific Ocean. Throughout city streets, storm drains are meant to capture water from rain storms and route excess runoff to the river and out to the ocean to prevent flooding.

What should not make its way to the storm drain?

The important thing to remember is that when it rains, everything on the surface of the street has the potential to reach the river. This includes anti-freeze from changing the fluid in your radiator, oil from a leaky car that contains petroleum hydrocarbons, pet waste, cigarette butts and other litter, leaves and clippings, and soap from washing the car.

Even such things as draining your pool or hot tub directly to the storm drain can impact fish and aquatic life, since chlorine and other chemicals will eventually make their way to surface waters.

How can I help?

Here are some ways to avoid adding pollutants to storm water. Keep in mind that pollutants include fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and even soil, which can contain nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorous that cause algae blooms in the river and deplete the oxygen supply to aquatic life.

- Keep trash off the streets - don't litter.
- Don't deposit leaves in the street - use the yard waste cans.
- Use commercial car washes, not your driveway.
- Be aware of do-it-yourself projects and their impacts.
- Avoid overwatering your lawn.



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Discharges into the storm drain can be even more dramatic during dry weather. Since the natural flow in rivers and streams is lower, the addition of even a small pollutant can have a significant impact on aquatic life habitat and, eventually, to the global ocean ecosystem.

Remember, Only Rain Down the Storm Drain.

What is the sewer system?

The sewer system throughout your city collects waste from homes and businesses, which flows to a wastewater treatment facility. After wastewater is treated, the recycled water is used for irrigation or other uses in some communities, in other communities, it is stored in ponds, and in others, it is discharged in the winter to creeks or the river. Sewage treatment plants work best when some items do not enter the sewer collection system or treatment system.

What should not be flushed down the toilet or sink?

You can help your community's sewer system by not flushing certain items down the toilet, such as dental floss, diapers, baby wipes, rags or feminine products. Many products that are sold as "flushable" actually cause problems in sewer systems.

Cooking grease and oil belong in the garbage not the drain. The best practice is to let grease harden and throw it in the trash. Cooking grease poured down sink drains can block the sewer and cause a sewer backup, which could potentially get into your home or business, and even into the storm drain, which can cause severe environmental damage.

What about pharmaceuticals?

Prescription drugs, such as antibiotics, birth control pills, hormones, and anti-depressants, should not be flushed down the toilet or thrown away in the trash. This includes over-the-counter medications, such as pain relievers, cold/flu remedies, and antiseptics. Many pharmaceuticals are not fully removed by conventional wastewater treatment, and when placed in the trash, pharmaceuticals can potentially leach into groundwater.



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What is the Safe Medicine Disposal Program?

Under the Safe Medicine Disposal Program, you can drop off unused and expired medications so they can be disposed of properly. In the Russian River watershed, a complete list of take-back locations is at www.safemedicinedisposal.org.

Get involved and find out ways that you can help.

There are many ways that you and your family can get involved in helping your community protect our environment. Start by educating your friends. Incorporate the practices in this article into your everyday life. Consider volunteering for creek and river cleanup events in your community. Visit www.rrwatershed.org for more information.

This article was authored by Suzanne Stephensen of the City of Healdsburg 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.