



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – March 2015

Used Motor Oil and Filters

Help Conserve a Natural Resource While Keeping Our Waterways Clean

Millions of gallons of oil have been spilled across the United States through ship, rail and road collisions, explosions, pipeline ruptures, storms, etc. Big oil disasters continue to reverberate through the environment and through our news cycles: the BP oil rig explosion that wreaked havoc in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the ship Cosco Busan that crashed into the Bay Bridge in 2007 dumping oil into San Francisco Bay, and the famous Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989. While we watch the ongoing analysis, litigation, and attempted cleanup from these high-profile events, there are measures we can all take to reduce a lesser but still very serious threat.

The Problem

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, used motor oil is the largest single source of pollution in America's rivers. Each year in the US, oil that drips from improperly maintained vehicles, together with oil that is improperly disposed of by people changing their own automobile oil, is greater than the 11 million gallons of oil spilled into Alaska's Prince William Sound from the infamous Exxon Valdez.

It takes only a small amount of oil to cause real problems. Motor oil poured onto the ground or into storm drains, or tossed into trash cans (even in a sealed container) can contaminate and pollute the soil, groundwater, streams, and rivers; not to mention, it is illegal! Used oil in waterways threatens fish, waterfowl, insects, and all other aquatic life. A single quart of oil can make an oil slick extending over a couple of acres of water and one gallon of used oil can foul the taste of 1 million gallons of water! Properly recycling your used motor oil reduces this pollution threat.

If you change your own oil, you probably already know that it can be easily and conveniently recycled. Filters must be recycled too. Used oil filters can contain more than 45 percent used motor oil in weight when removed from a vehicle. 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 liquid mess called "leachate" that percolates down to the landfill liner and eventually finds its way into groundwater.

What You Can Do

There are many locations in Sonoma County and Mendocino County where used oil and filters can be dropped off for free. Most residents of Sonoma County also have free curbside pickup of motor oil and filters, available from their garbage haulers. Sonoma County information is available in the Sonoma County Recycling Guide printed in the YP Yellow Pages phone book under "Recycling," or by calling (707) 565-3375, or by visiting the Agency's website at www.recyclenow.org. Mendocino County information is available by calling (707) 468-9710, or at www.mendorecycle.org. There is also a searchable database of oil collection locations statewide at www.calrecycle.ca.gov/usedoil.



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Even if you don't change your own oil, you may be adding to the oil pollution problem, depending on if your vehicle drips or burns even the smallest amount of 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. Properly maintaining your car 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 established car washes, which are plumbed to remove the oil and send the wastewater to a treatment plant.

The old standard of changing your oil every 3,000 miles is woefully out of date and no longer applies to most cars. 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.calrecycle.ca.gov/UsedOil/OilChange.

By recycling and conserving this valuable resource, you will be doing your part to keep our precious waterways and groundwater clean.

This article was authored by Connie Cloak, contractor to the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency (SCWMA) and Lisa Steinman with the SCWMA, 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.