

We Can All Help Clean Our Waters
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What do you know about stormwater? Polluted stormwater runoff is the largest source of water pollution in North Carolina and the U.S. Stormwater and stormwater pollution can contaminate drinking water sources, sicken swimmers, disrupt aquatic habitats, contribute to flash flooding and cause erosion. And the primary cause of stormwater pollution is people going about their daily business. Most have no idea they are polluting the water we use for fishing, swimming, paddling and drinking.

Stormwater runoff occurs when rain or even water from a garden hose flows over the ground. Hard surfaces like driveways, rooftops and parking lots prevent stormwater from soaking into the ground. The water flows into storm drains or flows downhill to a creek, river or lake. Stormwater picks up debris, chemicals, dirt and other pollutants as it flows toward the storm drain or creek.

A statewide survey last fall found that almost two-thirds of us do not know stormwater receives no treatment before storm drains carry it into a river. The cigarette butt tossed from a car, the excess fertilizer washed off a lawn or field, the oil leak in the driveway, soil washed off a construction site – once these pollutants are carried into a storm drain, their next stop is one of our rivers.

We all contribute to stormwater pollution. We all can be part of the solution. There are roles for government, business and individuals to play in improving our water quality.

The city of Asheville and other WNC municipalities are required by the federal Clean Water Act to manage stormwater runoff and protect water quality. Asheville and the other municipalities are charged with controlling runoff, providing education and tracking illicit discharges. Several strategies will accomplish these goals in Asheville, including new erosion control ordinances, more frequent street sweeping and improved storm drain maintenance. Cities also must practice what they preach by using pollution prevention measures in municipal operations.

Businesses can do their part to prevent water pollution. Dirt, oil and debris that collect in parking lots are washed into storm drains. Sweeping up litter, covering dumpsters and storage to avoid spills, and reporting any chemical spill will help protect our water quality.

Uncovered fueling stations allow spills to be washed into storm drains. Covered stations and auto care facilities that contain leaks or spills, along with prompt cleanup, will keep harmful fluids out of our rivers.

Erosion is a hot topic in the mountains. The main pollutant in stormwater, by volume, is sediment. The primary source of sediment is erosion from agriculture, development and eroding streambeds. This sediment chokes lakes and carries chemicals into waterways, making them unsuitable for fishing, boating or swimming. The most effective way to eliminate erosion and runoff from a project site is by promptly re-establishing ground cover. Silt fences and other measures also should be installed and maintained.

Action by government and business is important, but all of us as individuals have the biggest impact in protecting water quality.

Urban runoff, agriculture and construction are all contributors to water pollution – and so potentially is your yard. The pollutants that find their way into streams after a rainfall, or after you water the lawn, include excess fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides. (Three times more pesticides are applied per acre to home lawns and gardens than are applied to agricultural crops!)

Gardeners should use pesticides and fertilizers sparingly, after testing the soil to determine its needs; use organic mulch or safer pest control methods whenever possible. Other tips: compost or mulch yard waste; plant, mulch, or contain areas of bare soil; and consider installing a rain garden, rain barrel or other landscape feature to capture runoff from your roof and driveway.

Other common activities that contribute to stormwater pollution are car washing, pet walking and littering. Many of us wash our own vehicles, but washing cars and cleaning auto parts at home can send dirt and detergents into the storm drain. It's better to use a commercial car wash that treats or recycles its wastewater, or wash the car on your yard so the water and dirt are absorbed into the ground.

When walking your pet, remember to pick up the waste and dispose of it properly. Most pet walkers do not "scoop the poop." The major source of fecal coliform bacteria in local waters is pet waste. And don't litter! Every year Americans toss out more than 175 million pounds of cigarette butts alone. The *Raleigh News and Observer* noted in April that, "Last year,

prison inmates and state highway workers removed 10.2 million pounds of litter from state roadways, at a taxpayer cost of \$16.3 million – up from 2004. Private cleanup efforts netted almost 2 million pounds more.”

Our mountain waterways contribute much to our quality of life and to our economy. Water pollution threatens our health and our enjoyment of WNC’s rivers and lakes, as well as recreation businesses, trout fishing and tourism. Preventing pollution is always cheaper than cleaning it up. When we send litter or other pollutants down the storm drain, everyone – the urban resident, farmer, recreational enthusiast and taxpayer – must pay for the damage. We all live downstream.

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