

RRWA Environmental Column – April 2010

Hazardous Materials Spill Response

The Russian River Watershed Association (RRWA) and its member agencies strive to inform community members about our beautiful watershed and ways to keep it healthy and thriving. This article is about how to respond to spills of hazardous materials. Commonly encountered hazardous materials include fuels (such as gasoline), pesticides (for lawn care etc.), vehicle fluids (including antifreeze and motor oil), and household chemicals (such as chlorine bleach). A hazardous materials spill might occur in your home, in your yard, at work or out in the world. Simple actions on your part can make a big difference to the health of our watershed.

What constitutes a spill?

A spill may be found in a variety of different forms. An overturned tanker truck is a major spill. However, smaller spills, such as leaking fluids from parked cars, paint spills, or discharge of chlorinated water from water line breaks, also have the potential to adversely affect our watershed.

Why is spill response important?

If not properly cleaned-up, spilled hazardous materials can travel overland or through storm drains to the Russian River and its tributaries. Pollutants from spills can cause illness or death to pets, fish and wildlife. Spilled antifreeze, for example, is very toxic and can attract pets and other animals due to its sweet taste. It only takes one tablespoon of antifreeze to cause death to an average size dog.

What should I do if I witness a major spill?

If you witness a major spill (such as an overturned tanker truck) call 911 and leave the area of the spill. Police and firefighters are trained and equipped to respond to significant spills of hazardous materials. In many areas, specialty first-responder units exist to deal with spill response. For example, the Redwood Empire Hazardous Incident Team (REHIT) responds to major spills providing backup to local fire departments in Mendocino County.

What about less significant spills in public areas?

If you see smaller amounts of spilled materials such as pools of antifreeze or motor oil on the street, call your local public works department. If you discover a spill after business hours or on a weekend, call the non-emergency number of your local police or sheriff's office. In Sonoma County, you can call the Redwood Empire Dispatch Communications Authority (REDCOM) at (707) 576-1365.

If you see a water line break, you should also call your local public works department or the water utility (or law enforcement office after business hours). Although water line breaks may not be what one thinks as a spill, potable water from water line breaks should be prevented from entering storm drains. Potable water is generally chlorinated to prevent bacterial contamination and, while this water is safe for people, it can be problematic for fish and other aquatic organisms.

What should I do if I spill hazardous materials at home?

Smaller spills may occur while you are fixing your car, filling the lawn mower with fuel or other routine activities. Have an absorbent material like “kitty litter” or sawdust on hand for these small household spills. Spread the absorbent over the spill and then place the used absorbent in a sealed container. Anything that you use to absorb a hazardous substance should be disposed of in the same manner as the hazardous substance itself. For Sonoma County residents, see www.recyclenow.org or call the Eco-Desk Hotline 707-565-DESK(3375) information on how to dispose of hazardous substances. For Mendocino County residents, see www.mendorecycle.org or call (707) 468-9704.

Prevent spills at home by using and storing as few hazardous materials as possible. Keep your vehicle properly maintained and check for leaks periodically. Use integrated pest management techniques to limit or eliminate your use of pesticides.

What about hazardous materials at work?

If you deal with hazardous materials at work, your company should have spill response plans in place. If you have questions about hazardous materials handling in the workplace, talk to your employer or call your local fire department for more information.

This article was authored by Rick Seanor of the City of Ukiah 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.