

Your Watershed

By: The Russian River Watershed Association

Used Motor Oil: a slow disaster that every one of us can help to prevent

The current disaster in the Gulf of Mexico makes us all painfully aware of the damage that oil can do in the environment. While we watch the efforts to attempt some mitigation of this terrible tragedy, there are measures we all can take to reduce a quieter but still very serious source of oil in the environment.

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 as a result of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster.

It takes very little oil to cause real problems. A single quart of oil can make an oil slick extending over a couple of acres of water surface! This film of oil blocks oxygen and sunlight, disrupting natural ecosystems. It is also toxic, containing trace amounts of heavy metals like cadmium and lead, and carcinogens such as benzene.

If you change your own oil, you probably know that it's easy and convenient to recycle it. Hopefully you also know that filters must be recycled too. 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 "leachate" that percolates down to the landfill liner and may eventually find its way into groundwater.

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 pickup available from their garbage haulers. Sonoma County information is available in the Recycling Guide located under "R" in the AT&T Yellow Pages, or 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.

Even if you don't change your own oil, you may be adding to the oil pollution problem. If your car drips or burns a little 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. Maintaining your car well 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 permeable soil area where it can be filtered by soil and microorganisms. Better yet, use a car wash because they are equipped to remove the oil and plumbed to send the waste water to a treatment plant.

Many people change their oil more often than necessary. Remember that producing oil causes environmental damage, so using less makes a positive difference. For information on reducing the frequency of oil changes, including a list of manufacturers' recommendations for many car models, check out www.3000milemyth.org.

This article was authored by Connie Cloak, contractor to the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency on behalf of RRWA. RRWA 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.