



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – April 2016 Storm Drain Awareness for Earth Day

It is hard to imagine but before 1970, it was legal to dump chemicals, fertilizer or other toxic wastes into our creeks, streams and waterways! In spring 1970, Earth Day was created as a way to highlight environmental issues and causes. Over 20 million citizens demonstrated during that first Earth Day in an act to show their support for a healthy environment. Today, Earth Day is celebrated in over 192 countries around the world. Ideally, every day should be treated as Earth Day but in the spirit of April 22, 2016 let us do our part to protect our streams and creeks.

Only rain down the storm drain!

Rainwater is NOT treated once it enters the storm drain collection system. All water that enters a storm drain eventually discharges directly into a creek or waterway. Chemicals from pesticides, motor oil/gas from vehicles, paints, trash, yard clippings, cigarette butts, and pet waste all end up in our creeks and streams if allowed to enter the storm drain system.



Take out the trash

Trash, including yard waste and grass clippings, can clog storm drains and cause street flooding. Litter hurts wildlife and makes a mess of our environment. You can help by placing trash and yard waste in appropriate bins with closed containers and keeping trash at a minimum by reusing and recycling when possible. Cigarette butts are one of the most commonly littered items and can take several years to decompose. Put cigarette butts in the ash tray and not in the street!

Give your home an Earth Day makeover

Several upgrades in the home will have a long-lasting impact when it comes to protecting our creeks and waterways from storm water pollution.

- Instead of allowing rain to flow off your property, redirect rain from your gutters to vegetated areas on your property or install rain barrels to harvest the rain water for later use.
- Reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides and fertilizers in your garden. Pesticides and fertilizers can enter our waterways by overspray or runoff into our storm drains. Chemicals entering the waterways can affect aquatic life but can also affect the quality of drinking water and the environment. There are many safe alternatives to using chemicals such as following the steps associated with [Integrated Pest Management](#) (IPM).
- Use a broom to clean outdoor surfaces. Never use a hose and water to wash anything into the street or storm drain.
- Store hazardous materials such as paint or solvents in closed containers protected from the rain. When ready, recycle at appropriate [hazardous waste facilities](#).



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- Keep your vehicles in good working order and never let any automobile fluids such as gas, oil or radiator fluid flow into the street or storm drain. If repairs need to be made, capture leaks with a drip pan or cardboard and clean up leaks and spills with absorbent material such as kitty litter.

Pick up after your pet

Pet waste is a threat to both human and environmental health. Bring a bag whenever you take your dog for a walk and dispose of waste properly in a bin. Pet waste can contain millions of microorganisms of bacteria or parasites. Decaying pet waste that enters watersheds can affect water quality as well as contain nutrients that promote weed and algae growth resulting in cloudy green water.

Wash your vehicle at a commercial car wash

Washing your car at home in the street, or in your driveway allows soapy water to enter the storm drain and eventually enter our creeks and waterways. A better choice is to take your car to a commercial car wash. Commercial car washes save water by using recycled water, often using only half the amount of water that home car washing uses. Commercial car washes are also required by law to properly treat and dispose of their used water.

Safe Medicine Program

Don't flush that unused or expired medication down the drain or dispose of it in the trash! Recent studies show that pharmaceuticals in rivers and streams, if present at high enough concentrations, can harm aquatic wildlife. When flushed down the drain, some medications may not be completely removed by wastewater treatment plants and can be discharged to surface waters. Proper disposal of unused pharmaceuticals will help protect the environment.



The safest way to dispose of unwanted medication is to bring it to [locations](#) that can accept unused and expired medicines for disposal. Additionally, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration is holding special "take-back" events at the Healdsburg Police Department (238 Center Street) and the Petaluma Police Department (969 Petaluma Blvd. North) on April 30th. Disposing of unused medication correctly prevents it from entering our waterways and the environment.

By keeping this checklist in mind, not just for Earth Day but for every day, we can do our part to allow only rain down the storm drains thereby increasing the health and quality of our watershed.

This article was authored by Marc Bautista of the City of Rohnert Park 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.