

Pollution's fallout: All roads lead to the ocean

Storm drains carry everything to the sea, including pesticides, cleaners and cigarette butts. Cities are fining homeowners.

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The next time you fertilize the lawn, spray for pests outdoors or wash your car in the driveway, think about the ocean. Anything used outdoors can wind up in the street. And anything in the street drains to the ocean.

"Many people don't make the connection between what they do in their yard and the ocean," said Marilyn Smith, Irvine Ranch Water District community relations manager. "The fact is, you can throw a gum wrapper in the street and it will end up 10 miles away in the ocean."

Known as urban runoff, pollution that makes its way to the ocean has largely been noticeable to residents through beach closures. Because of increasing enforcement of existing legislation regarding water runoff, however, it can affect homeowner's pocketbooks as well as their swimming schedules.

"Many homeowners are unaware that they could be fined," said Jim Sinasek, manager for the code and water quality enforcement division of the Newport Beach City Manager's office. Prohibited discharges that can trigger fines include any pollutant that travels from private or public property to the storm water drainage system, including yard debris, paint, motor oil, pesticides and water used to clean carpeting. Homeowners can even be cited for over-watering their yards.

Think no agency has the time, energy or resources to police homeowners? Think again.

"Each city has a code and water quality enforcement division, and we have the authority to issue notices of violation, which are \$100 for the first citation, \$200 for the second and \$500 for the third," Sinasek said. "We have people working weekdays, nights and weekends. Homeowners have already been fined and, with stepped-up enforcement, we expect there to

be more citations."

Although contractors and handymen working at a home may be cited, homeowners are ultimately responsible and can be fined for any work on their property, Sinasek said.

Since 1999, when enforcement was increased, Sinasek's office has issued more than 400 citations to residences and businesses in Newport Beach alone.

In Los Angeles County, authorities are just as serious. Earlier this year, the city of Inglewood started a storm water runoff investigation unit complete with storm water inspectors who, like those in Newport Beach, have the legal authority to issue citations.

"This is a mandated program through the Environmental Protection Agency, and it's being taken very seriously," said Shad Rezai, general manager of Water Works for Inglewood. "We have what is essentially an enforcement agency. The inspectors have badges, can make citations and even detain a person who becomes uncontrollable until the police arrive."

To date, Inglewood's investigation unit has focused on commercial facilities, but they will soon be starting a campaign to stop residents from draining swimming pool water into storm drains.

"We're attacking the issue of pool water first with residents because it involves a significant amount of water that contains chlorine and other chemicals," Rezai said. "No pool water should be drained into the street. We will start with public outreach and education and then issue fines if it becomes necessary."

After pool water, Rezai's unit will address other sources of residential pollution, including the washing of cars in the street, pesticide overflow and the rinsing away of excess grass clippings. Homeowners are urged to use carwashes, which are equipped to properly dispose of waste water.

"Until recently, fines for water quality and urban runoff have been restricted to the building industry," said Dixie Milberg, area manager for the Merit Cos., a Mission Viejo property management firm that has worked on water quality management for more than two years, especially in the

environmentally sensitive area of Crystal Cove. "Now, however, fines are starting to work their way into the communities, including homeowners' associations, which will pass the burden onto homeowners."

Current laws and guidelines regarding urban runoff stem from the 1987 amendments to the Clean Water Act of 1972, which requires cities and counties discharging water into storm systems to meet national standards.

Since 1990, operators of storm water systems throughout the U.S. have been required to gradually develop a storm water management program designed to prevent harmful pollutants from being dumped or washed by storm water runoff into the storm water system and discharged into local water bodies.

Although strides have been made regarding waste coming from commercial plants and refineries, "millions of small, seemingly innocuous actions" by property owners continue to contribute to urban runoff, said David Beckman, director of the water quality program for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national environmental organization with offices in Los Angeles.

Education is the key to curbing these small infractions.

The stenciling on storm drains throughout Southern California that reads "Drains to Ocean" is one part of the State Water Resources Control Board's campaign aimed at creating an understanding of urban storm water runoff.

"The stenciling shows parents and even kids that there is a direct connection between the drains and the beaches that we all want to enjoy," Beckman said.

Dumping just one quart of motor oil down a storm drain contaminates 250,000 gallons of ocean water, according to the Orange County Watershed & Coastal Resources Division.

"Curbing urban runoff is not only good for the environment, it's good for property values," Beckman said. "We are located next to one of the most extraordinary marine resources in the world. It's in our best interest to protect the beaches that have made Southern California homes so valuable."

Your part in a cleaner ocean

The small actions of many can make a difference in the quality of ocean water. Some tips to keep in mind from the Watershed & Coastal Resources Division of the Public Facilities & Resources Department of Orange County.

- **Household:** Buy nontoxic household products whenever possible. Clean up outdoor spills with absorbent material, such as kitty litter, rather than spraying them away with a garden hose.
- **Paint and solvents:** Clean water-based paints from rollers and brushes in sinks rather than at outdoor spigots that lack drainage to the sewer system. Use paint thinner to remove oil-based paints from brushes. Dispose of used thinner and unwanted leftover paint at a local household hazardous waste collection center.
- **Automotive:** Keep automobiles in good repair and watch for leaks. Take leftover fluids to the household hazardous waste collection center. Clean up leaks and spills with an absorbent material, such as kitty litter.
- **Swimming pool and spa:** Water containing chlorine is harmful to aquatic life. It should be drained through utility room sinks or other drainage hooked up to the sewer system.
- **Lawn and garden:** Use a broom or rake to clean up yard debris and place it in a trash can or appropriate recycling bin.

Apply pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers correctly. Use the proper amount and apply at the appropriate time during the growing season. Avoid spilling on concrete and don't wash away spills with water. Don't apply before rains.

Opt for organic fertilizers or controlled-release chemical fertilizers.

"Organics and controlled-release fertilizers are very effective at supplying nutrients over long periods at the stages when plants actively use them for growth," said Darren Haver, watershed management advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension. Various companies have made great strides recently in creating organic fertilizers that are effective throughout the year, such as Whitney Farms, which recently released a

year-round lawn-care program.

Divert rain gutters from paved surfaces onto turf areas so the water will filter into the soil. And apply mulch, which will prevent runoff and cause water to soak into the soil.

- **Pet care:** Pick up pet waste as soon as possible and dispose in the trash.

For more information regarding urban runoff, call (714) 567-6363 or visit <http://www.ocwatershed.com> . In Los Angeles call, (888) CLEANLA or visit <http://www.888CLEANLA.com> .