

The Soapy Sedan Scummy Streams Connection



For many, car washing is a springtime ritual. Often, citizens don't know that by washing all that winter grime off their vehicles they might actually be causing harm to our local waterways. Water entering storm drains, unlike water that enters sanitary sewers, does not undergo treatment before it is discharged into our waterways. When cars are washed on streets and driveways, that dirty water eventually winds up in rivers, streams, creeks, and lakes.

Washing one car may not seem to be a problem, but collectively car washing activity adds up to big problems for our local lakes, creeks and streams. Pollution associated with car washing degrades water quality while also finding its way into sediments, impacting aquatic habitats.

Washing your car is only a problem if you don't know where or how to do it correctly. The average homeowner uses 116 gallons of water to wash a car! Most commercial car washes use 60 percent less water for the entire process than a homeowner uses just to rinse the car. Among the many impacts of motor vehicles on our environment, car washing has been noted by water quality experts as a serious contributor to water pollution.

Water that runs off a car when it is washed in a driveway, street, or parking lot can contain substances that pollute the environment. Dirty water containing soap, detergents, residue from exhaust fumes, gasoline, heavy metals from rust, and motor oils can wash off cars and flow directly to storm drains and into the nearest creek or stream where it can harm water quality and wildlife. The phosphates from soap can cause excess algae to grow. Excessive algae smell bad, look bad, and harm water quality. As algae decay, the process uses up oxygen in the water that fish need. Car wash fundraisers can be a significant source of this kind of pollution.

These events are usually held in heavily paved areas where there is little runoff control or grass to filter out harmful substances before they reach our waterways.

So how can you reduce the impact to the environment when washing your car? Here are some tips:

- Go to a commercial car wash when your car needs cleaning to conserve water and prevent stormwater pollution. Commercial car washes recycle water and send wastewater to treatment systems where it is treated before being discharged into a waterway.

If you must wash your car at home, use the environmentally friendly car washing tips listed below to reduce water use and prevent stormwater pollution:

- Use a bucket and special biodegradable soap. Use as little soap and water as possible. Look for products that do not contain nonylphenol surfactants that act as endocrine disruptors that change the sex of fish and phosphates that contribute to algal blooms and low oxygen levels in waterways. When you are done, dump your bucket of soapy water into a sink, drain, or toilet that goes to a treatment system or into a vegetated area.
- Use a trigger spray nozzle to control water flow from the hose and reduce water use.
- Wash the car on a grassy area or other porous surface where soil microbes and vegetation can filter and break down pollutants and keep wash water out of the street and storm drains.
- You can also dike off your driveway and direct wash water into a landscaped area or vacuum it up with a ShopVac rather than allowing it to run into the street.
- Support environmentally friendly charity car wash events that block off nearby storm drains, use minimal amounts of water, and divert wash water to the sanitary sewer or nearby landscaping.



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