

October 2014

Water Quality Experts Ask for Help with “Illicit Discharges”

Residents, businesses and municipalities in our area are working to keep our lakes and rivers clean by keeping pollution out of the stormwater system. People sometimes dump things on the ground or into storm sewers that can harm our waters. When anything other than clear stormwater ends up in the stormwater system, water quality experts start using fancy terms like “illicit discharges” and “hazardous substance spills.” For a good rule of thumb for judging whether what you’re seeing is a problem, just think about how upset a parent would be if a child spilled that material into the family aquarium or swimming pool. If mom or dad would be mad, there’s a good chance you could be witnessing an “illicit discharge.” Residents and businesses can help make or keep our waters fishable and swimmable by correcting or reporting such pollution to the appropriate contacts.

Some illicit discharges are one-time events and are easy to recognize as a problem. Consider, for example, a ruptured oil pipeline or liquid manure spill, or even someone dumping paint down a storm drain. These need to be cleaned up immediately, and municipalities and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources staff have procedures for dealing with such toxic spills. Other illicit discharges are ongoing problems and are often harder to recognize. Examples include a failed, leaking septic system or a workshop floor drain that is connected to the stormwater system instead of the wastewater sewer system.

What can area residents do? First, consider your own house, especially if you have an older home. Do you have any waste pipes from inside the house that go anywhere other than your sewer or septic line when they leave the house? If so, you probably have an illicit discharge problem – look for ways to redirect those pollutants to your wastewater system.

Second, pay attention in your neighborhood. Watch for signs that someone has dumped something inappropriate into a storm drain, ditch, waterway, or onto the ground – oil, paint, cleaning solvents, anything other than clean water. If you do spot such pollution, take a picture and then contact your local municipal contact or Wisconsin DNR contact to report the pollution. Visit www.myfairlakes.com today for information on your local municipal contact. DNR’s spill hotline information is available at <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/spills/>

Third, tell your community leaders and municipal contact that you support policies and practices that reduce and clean runoff, such as installation of pervious pavement, construction site erosion control measures and other stormwater best management practices.

Madison Area Municipal Storm Water Partnership

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As a society, we have made great strides over the past 50 years in our efforts to stop polluting our lakes and rivers. We've corrected many of the worst problems, such as the direct discharge of untreated industrial and municipal wastewater into rivers. But our waterways are still not as clean as we'd like because of stormwater pollution. Please do your part to help keep our stormwater runoff clean and clear, and downstream waters fishable and swimmable.

This article is brought to you by the Madison Area Municipal Storm Water Partnership, working with the Rock River Stormwater Group to reduce the amount of pollution making its way to our lakes and streams. The Yahara chain of lakes and the Yahara River both ultimately drain to the Rock River. Both groups thank you for helping to Renew the Rock by reducing stormwater pollution throughout the Rock River area. Learn more at www.myfairlakes.com and www.renewtherock.com.

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