

October 2014

Town, Village and City Actions Keep Water Clean

In central Dane County, towns, villages, cities, Dane County and UW-Madison work together to limit pollution entering waterways from storm water runoff. These municipal efforts meet state and federal permitting requirements and maintain healthy freshwater ecosystems. One of the most important ways they do this is by detecting and removing improper discharges of water into their systems of storm drains, pipes, greenways, ponds and storm ditches. These “illicit discharge” programs keep nutrients, toxic substances, metals, oils and grease, solvents, harmful microbes, and other debris from harming natural communities of fish, plants, insects and other beneficial organisms.

Some examples of illegal discharges to the stormwater conveyance system are indirect connections, such as leaks of wastewater from crushed or collapsed sanitary sewer pipes, or from defective septic tanks. Other illegal discharges are direct unpermitted wastewater pipe connections, such as from a commercial car wash or dishwasher or laundry wastewater, into the storm drain system. Other illicit discharges include illegal dumping of cleaning chemicals, paint, automotive fluids, and discharges of human waste from boats and recreational vehicles. These are a problem because, unlike wastewater that flows to a wastewater treatment plant, storm water flows to waterways without any treatment and may carry pollutants that degrade water quality.

One of the ways that municipalities identify and eliminate these pollution sources is by conducting regular inspections to identify potential illegal connections to their storm water conveyance systems. For example, municipal inspectors check to see if liquid is flowing in storm water outfalls, even when it hasn’t rained for quite awhile. This flow in dry weather could indicate that nearby indoor plumbing is illegally connected to the storm drainage system. The inspectors follow up on citizen complaints of strong, unusual odors and stains.

Municipalities also find the source of spills by checking manholes along the drainage system to identify where a discharge enters the system, clean them up, encourage voluntary compliance, and may fine a deliberate violator when appropriate. Municipal staff look for things that most residents don’t think about, such as leaking garbage dumpsters, particularly those that

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contain decomposing food waste. One great new practice being used in our area is the effective use of concrete washout boxes (see photo), which provide a great alternative to illegal dumping in the storm drain inlet. All of these actions are important, because these are sources of pollution that ultimately drain to our lakes, streams and wetlands.



Area residents can help keep our waters clean by reporting anyone pouring something into a storm drain inlet, ditch or stream. The Madison Area Municipal Storm Water Partnership website, www.myfairlakes.com, can direct you to your local contact.

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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