

Residential Car Washing and Stormwater

Q: Is Ecology saying I can't wash my car at home?

A: No. You can continue to wash your car at home. Just wash your car sensibly so the soapy water does not get into our storm drains that are connected with our downstream waters. Washington citizens can have it both ways – you can wash your car and you can help keep our waters clean. Ecology's stormwater permits¹ require cities and counties to adopt ordinances that prohibit putting anything down the storm drains with pollutants like soapy water. Because of this, the state is taking an educational approach with the public about residential car washing. Ecology recommends that local governments take the same course. See Ecology's web page Residential Car Washing and Stormwater Permits www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/stormwater/CarWash.html

Q: What is the problem with soapy, dirty water going down the storm drain?

A: Water that enters the storm drain in urban areas goes directly through the pipes to streams, lakes, bays, and Puget Sound. In most areas, the stormwater does NOT go to a sewer treatment plant like the water that goes down the drain inside your house. Stormwater carries all the pollutants with it directly to our surface waters – soapy water and all. Dirty car wash water often contains oil, grease, and toxic metals. Soapy water and the chemicals in many detergents are harmful to fish and other aquatic life. This pollution also can get in drinking water in streams where water treatment plants take in the water farther downstream. It's not uncommon for water quality inspectors to receive a complaint because the creek is full of soapsuds, especially when it rains after a dry period. In most cases the people washing their cars weren't aware that the storm drain went directly to the creek.

Q: How can my few gallons of soapy water cause damage?

A: The biggest pollution challenge to Washington's streams, lakes, and marine water in urban areas is stormwater. The stormwater from one outfall may collect drainage from a large area with hundreds of homes, businesses, and parking lots. The accumulation of all the pollutants that run off those areas in the rain, especially after a dry period, adds up to a lot of pollution. We all need to be mindful of how we wash cars, pick up after our pets, and take care of our yards so we can prevent pollution.



¹ To learn more about Ecology's municipal stormwater permits, go to our website at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/stormwater/municipal/index.html>

Water Quality Program

Q: How do I wash my car and prevent pollution?

A: You can wash your car and prevent stormwater pollution if you:

- Park the car on grass or an area where the water can filter into the ground and not run off to the storm drain. If the driveway drains to an area where it can infiltrate, that works too.
- Divert the drainage away from the storm drain.
- Use a hose with a shut-off valve to reduce possible runoff from the grassy area.
- Dump your soapy water out in the sink or on an area where it will filter into the ground.
- If you don't have a good place at home to wash your car, we ask you to take it to a commercial car wash (either self-serve or machine wash) where the wash water drains to the sanitary sewer.

Q: Is the city or county going to fine me for washing my car in my driveway?

A: Ecology recommends that the cities and counties take a public education approach to residential car washing. Over time, we expect to see people change, just as we did with littering and recycling, but it takes time and public education.



Q: What about all the fundraising car washes for schools, youth groups, and churches?

A: Local governments will provide education to those groups as well, and many already have programs to promote fundraising car washes in ways that avoid pollution, for example:

- Many local governments lend out pump kits at no cost. The equipment can temporarily plug the storm drain and pump the wash water to the sanitary sewer inlet.
- Bay for the Day - Some local governments have a list of self-serve car washes with car wash bays available to rent at low cost for a charity car wash.
- Coupon sales for a local commercial car wash. Local governments have a list of commercial car washes that provide coupons to sell at a discount.
- Arrange to locate the car wash where the discharge will disperse across a grassy area and filter into the ground.

For more information and links to city and county resources, see

www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/stormwater/carwash.html