

Car Washing and Water Quality

For many of us, washing our car or truck is as American as baseball and apple pie. It's hard to imagine that there's a connection between keeping your car clean and keeping our streams, lakes, and marine waters clean and healthy. It's harder still to believe that one person washing their car can really cause any harm. However, thousands of people washing their cars can be a serious problem. So before you grab the bucket, sponge, and the hose, let's talk about some of the aspects of washing your car that we should be concerned with.



Where Does the Washwater Go?

Car washwater and rinse water contain a mixture of detergents, oils, heavy metals and other pollutants that we wash off of our vehicles. If this washwater flows along the street, it can enter a storm drain, and then flow to Edmonds' streams and lakes or directly into Puget Sound. This soapy, polluted water is untreated and can kill aquatic plants and animals. Don't forget, a storm drain is the entrance to a system of underground pipes that collects and carries water from streets and parking lots, and discharges it **untreated** into Puget Sound, and our lakes, streams and wetlands.

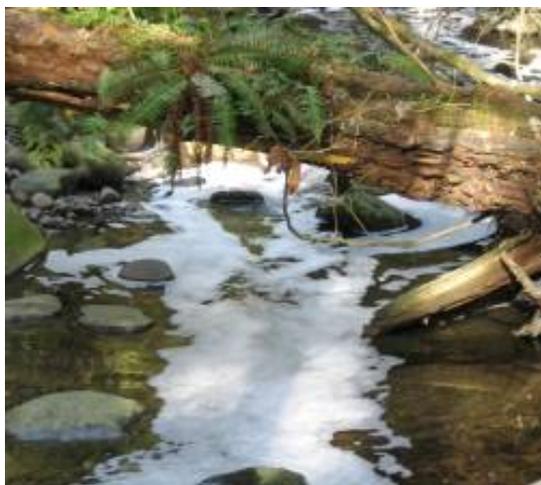


Is Car Washing Illegal?

No! Washing your vehicle is not illegal. But discharge of the soapy, dirty washwater into the storm drain is technically a violation of federal, state, and City regulations. However, per Department of Ecology recommendation, the City has adopted an educational rather than enforcement approach to car washing. For more information from the Department of Ecology, go to www.ecy.wa.gov/washington_waters/carwash.html or www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/stormwater/CarWash.html.

What About Soaps?

All soaps, including biodegradable ones, can harm our waterways. Soaps break the surface tension of water, lowering the oxygen level which is harmful to fish and other aquatic life. The worst soaps contain phosphates, which can cause unwanted algae blooms in surface waters. And don't forget — car washwater is a mixture of soap, oil, grease, and heavy metals.



What Should I Do To Keep Our Waters Clean?

- Take your car to a commercial car wash facility that discharges its washwater to the sewer system, where it's treated or recycled.
- When washing your car at home, wash it on the lawn (or other vegetated area) to keep the water out of the storm drain. Mild, soapy water won't hurt your lawn; it will actually water it!
- Wash your car on an area that drains to your lawn/vegetated area.
- Use waterless car wash products, available at auto parts stores, supermarkets, and online. Saves water too!!
- Find a community car wash that uses a car wash kit and disposes of the wash water to the sewer system.



To Keep Our Creeks Clean, Use a Car Wash Kit.

If you're organizing a charity car wash, the City of Edmonds has two SudSafe Car Wash Kits available to community groups and schools to encourage you to run environmentally-friendly car wash events. Each kit has all the equipment you'll need - hoses, safety cones, and a basin to capture and divert the soapy water away from the storm drain and onto a lawn (or other vegetated area) or into a sink that drains to the sanitary sewer. See contact information below to reserve a kit.



Site Requirements for using SudSafe Car Wash Kit

- Electric power within 100 ft. of the wash area.
- Grass/gravel/vegetated area within 100 ft. of the wash area, or a
- Sink/toilet that leads to sewer system within 100 ft. of wash area.

Other Ways to Wash Your Car and Keep Edmonds Clean and Green.

- Use a shut-off nozzle on your hose to conserve water.
- Choose a soap that has little or no phosphates, is biodegradable, and contains no chlorine, bleach, nitrates, or ammonia. Avoid labels with "Caution," "Danger," or "Warning." The soapy water will be kinder to your lawn or other vegetated area.
- Use a small amount of soap! You don't need a bucketful of suds.
- If you live in a condominium complex, ask your Homeowners Association to purchase a SudSafe Car Wash Kit for use at your complex. This kit will allow you to wash your vehicle in your parking lot and not discharge the wash water to the storm drains.

Questions or comments? Contact Mike Cawrse, City of Edmonds Stormwater Technician, at (425) 771-0220 x1322 or michael.cawrse@edmondswa.gov.

