



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

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September 24, 2008

Phase I and Phase II Permittees and Other Interested Parties

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RE: Residential Car Washing Under Washington's Municipal Stormwater Permits

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

It has recently become clear that there is significant confusion regarding how Washington's municipal stormwater permits apply to residential car washing. This letter will provide additional clarity and guidance on this issue.

For many of us, washing our car or truck is as American as baseball and apple pie. It's hard to imagine that there is a connection between keeping your car clean and keeping our rivers, 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. Soapy, dirty car wash water, carrying with it oils, grease, and toxic metals is, without a doubt, a serious pollution source when it occurs on a large scale. Since most storm drains run directly into local streams or marine waters – without treatment – storm drains are direct extensions of those local waters. Some believe that our stormwater permits “prohibit” residential car washing and wonder what, if any, enforcement actions might be taken against those “violating” the prohibition. Let me be clear: **the permits do not prohibit car washing.** The permit only deals with discharges to storm drains. In this case, that means that wash water, which contains soap, oils, grease, metals and other chemicals – all of which pollute water and harm fish – is prohibited from being discharged to public storm drains.

So how do we wash our cars without sending the dirty wash water down the storm drain? There are a number of simple ways to wash cars that don't result in soapy wash waters getting into our creeks and rivers and lakes. We recommend washing cars on grass or any other surface where the wash water seeps into the ground. Or you can lay something on the ground to divert the wash water away from the storm drain. And, of course, you can always take your car to a commercial car wash.

Charity car washes are almost a rite of passage for most of us, and they can also be done in a way that avoids the dirty wash water getting into the storm drain. Again, washing cars on a permeable surface, or diverting wash water to such surfaces, is an easy option. Another option is to divert the car wash waters into a sanitary sewer where it is treated. Many local governments have car wash kits that can be used for this purpose. Some charities rent a “bay for a day” at a self-serve car wash. Many commercial car washes will work with charity groups to provide discount car wash coupons that the charity can then sell. For more information on using a commercial car wash as part of a charity fund raiser, please look at the

Puget Sound Car Wash Association web site: <http://www.charitycarwash.org/>. Many local governments have developed charity car wash kits that are available to charities to use. For example, King County has a lot of good information on where to borrow or how to build a car wash kit. http://dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/pi/carwash_res.htm .

I want to further clarify that while the permits do not allow soap and detergents to enter a storm drain, we recommend an educational rather than enforcement approach about car washing. We definitely don't recommend enforcement against charity car washes. We urge our local government partners to take the same approach we will – education regarding impacts and alternatives. We want to work with people to solve this problem, and we are confident that Washington's citizens will work with us and with their local government to avoid polluting their local streams and lakes.

Many citizens already wash their cars in ways that prevent water pollution. Others should be made aware of the harmful impacts of putting dirty wash water into our streams and rivers, so that they can make the small adjustments necessary to avoid water pollution.

Stormwater is by far the greatest threat we face in protecting Washington's rivers and streams. Unlike other pollution sources, the pollutants carried by stormwater come from all of us. Countless tiny sources of pollution, such as drops of oil or antifreeze, copper shavings from car brakes, zinc from galvanized fencing, air pollutants like mercury or diesel soot that fall to the ground, and many others, all get swept up and washed into our rivers and streams when it rains. Alone, these sources are miniscule. But added up, the problem is enormous, and is truly our greatest water pollution challenge. To reduce the adverse impacts of stormwater, we all have to do our small part. We should be cautious in our use of fertilizers, pick up after our pets, and make sure our vehicles are not dripping oils and grease onto the road. We should also be mindful when we wash our cars and trucks at home.

Changing how we do things can be hard. But we've demonstrated that we can and will do it when given adequate information and alternatives. Dumping used motor oil down the storm drain used to be common practice, but now we know better. We intend to work with cities and counties and with individual citizens – with patience and persistence – to provide needed information about the unintended and often hidden impacts of pollutants like soap, oils, grease and metals, and about alternatives that allow us to keep our vehicles clean and still protect our rivers, lakes, and streams.

Sincerely,



Jay J. Manning,
Director