

Stormwater Management FAQ

A Guide to Frequently Asked Questions

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Stormwater Pollution

Question: What is stormwater runoff?

Answer: Stormwater runoff occurs when precipitation from rain or snowmelt flows over the ground. Impervious surfaces such as buildings, driveways, sidewalks, and streets prevent stormwater from naturally soaking into the ground

Question: Isn't stormwater runoff natural and harmless because it only consists of rainwater?

Answer: Rain is not solely to blame for stormwater runoff problems. While rainfall is completely natural, the pollution problem arises when rainwater picks up contaminants as it flows over roads, parking lots, and other impervious surfaces into storm drains. Stormwater can pick up trash, debris, fertilizer, lawn chemicals, dirt, and other pollutants and flows into the storm sewer system or directly to a creek, stream, or river. Anything that enters the storm sewer system is discharged untreated into the waterbodies we use for recreation and providing drinking water.

Question: Are sewers and storm drains the same thing?

Answer: No, they are two completely separate drainage systems. Wastewater from your sinks, showers, washing machines, dishwashers, and toilets will travel through the sanitary sewer system to the Wastewater Treatment Plant where it will be extensively treated before being discharged into the Marais Des Cygnes River. Conversely, water entering storm drains flows untreated, directly into our local streams and rivers. The graphic below illustrates the difference:



Question: What kinds of pollutants are found in the storm drain system?

Answer: Oils, antifreeze, fertilizers, pesticides, human and animal waste, paint products, sediment, lawn debris (grass and leaves), trash, and other debris are only a few of the many pollutants that can be found in the storm drain system.

Question: What solutions exist to solve stormwater problems?

Answer: Solutions to stormwater runoff include stormwater detention/retention basins, pervious infrastructure, and community education programs. Stormwater pollution and other problems can be reduced or prevented by responsible and efficient practices of homeowners, businesses, City entities, and other pollution prevention programs.

The City of Ottawa's Stormwater Program

Question: What is NPDES?

Answer: NPDES stands for National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, which is the compliance system for the Clean Water Act of 1972. NPDES is divided into two phases. Phase I regulates cities of 100,000 or more. Phase II covers cities of less than 100,000 — like Ottawa. NPDES requires that stormwater discharging to waters of the United States (in our case the Marais Des Cygnes River) meet minimum federal water quality requirements. More information about NPDES can be found at: www.epa.gov/npdes

Question: Why doesn't the City build a stormwater treatment facility?

Answer: Due to the variation of rainfall amounts and runoff volume, a stormwater treatment plant would be economically infeasible. Such a facility would be extremely costly to build and maintain. Even if a stormwater treatment plant existed in Ottawa or Franklin County, the large amount of stormwater runoff from rainstorms would easily overburden the system.

Question: What is the City of Ottawa doing about illegal dumping into storm drains?

Answer: The City of Ottawa passed a comprehensive stormwater management ordinance in 2011, which partly addressed dumping and littering into storm drains. Enforcement of this ordinance is part of the City of Ottawa's NPDES Phase II permit requirements. Code enforcement officers will be authorized to cite any person caught illegally dumping any material other than rainwater into or around storm drains.

Question: What kind of educational programs or informational materials about stormwater are available?

Answer: The city has placed programs on the Government Access Channel (channel 20), developed informational brochures with local, state, and federal information, including many links to informative websites on stormwater and related issues. In addition, the city will be conducting a survey about stormwater issues and staff members are available to give presentations. If you have any questions, comments, or ideas, please e-mail us at stormwater@ottawaks.gov or call us at (785) 229-3637.

Question: I have seen markers on storm drains. What do they mean?

Answer: Pictured below, the markers found on Ottawa's storm drains say, "No Dumping, Drains to River," and are in place to remind each of us that anything we dump into storm drains or leave on the ground is untreated and will find its way into our local streams, rivers, and lakes.



Is it Okay ... ?

Question: Is it okay to wash my car on the driveway?

Answer: The best way you can wash your car is to use a full or self-service car wash. These commercial car washes are designed to recycle used water and filter out many of the chemicals and other pollutants washed off your vehicle. In addition, the water used at commercial facilities will eventually be treated at the wastewater treatment plant before entering our local waterways.

The best alternative to a commercial car wash is to part your vehicle on the lawn or gravel and allowing the soil to naturally filter out some of the contaminants. Also, using biodegradable soaps and as little water as possible will help reduce contaminants.

Question: Is it okay to wash or sweep leaves, grass, soil, and/or other natural elements down the storm drain?

Answer: Grass and leaves repeatedly swept or washed into storm drains can become a breeding ground for rodents and insects and can clog drains, causing localized flooding. In addition, plant matter washed into bodies of water deprives aquatic life of oxygen. Soil is easily washed into storm drains when it rains and is a serious problem at many construction sites. This sediment clouds water and destroys aquatic habitats.

Question: Is it okay to wash my paintbrushes or similar items in the gutter?

Answer: No, paint can be toxic to fish by interfering with breathing and inhibit aquatic plant growth. Nearly all chemicals have some negative side effects on the environment. Please dispose of all waste properly! Contact the Franklin County Household Hazardous Waste Facility or Franklin County Recycling Center at (785) 229-3176.

Question: Is it okay to leave pet waste on the ground?

Answer: No, pet waste carries bacteria that harms humans and other animals. When left on the ground it can contaminate rain or snow runoff as it travels to the storm drains. Pet waste should be picked up and disposed of in the sanitary sewer or trash containers. Contrary to what most people believe pet waste is not natural for our environment, especially when it is washed into bodies of water.

What Can I Do?

Question: Why should I care about what goes down the storm drain?

Answer: Everyone should be concerned about stormwater quality because what we put down the storm drain ends up in places like Rock Creek, Possum Run, and the Marais Des Cygnes River. Everything we do affects people living downstream, but don't let that fool you into believing you won't be affected: Remember, we all live downstream from someone.

Question: What can I do to make a difference?

Answer: You can make a huge difference in stormwater quality simply by changing a few practices at home and work.

Here are seven easy steps to get you started:

- 1) Avoid over-watering and watering over pavement.
 - 2) Mulch grass clippings into your lawn or begin composting your organic waste.
 - 3) Pick up your pet waste and flush it in the toilet or dispose of it in the trash.
 - 4) Wash your car at a commercial car wash or on the lawn.
 - 5) Sweep dirt onto the lawn and pick up any litter you find.
 - 6) When fertilizing, follow instructions, sweep up any excess, and avoid fertilizing before it rains.
 - 7) Take leftover household chemicals such as oil, paint, antifreeze, cleaners, pesticides, and herbicides to the Household Hazardous Waste Facility located at 2017 S Elm, Ottawa, KS. Their number is (785) 229-3176 and facility hours are from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM, Monday through Friday and 9:00 AM through 1:00 PM on Saturday.
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Question: What happens if I see a neighbor, or know someone who is dumping trash, oil, etc. into a storm drain?

Answer: A storm drain's sole purpose is to collect stormwater runoff and transport it to our local bodies of water. Dumping anything into a storm drain is illegal and is a violation of the Clean Water Act of 1972. To report illegal dumping, call the City of Ottawa at (785) 229-3637. If you see someone dumping waste into a storm drain and have an amicable relationship with him/her, it may just be a matter of informing and making them aware of the environmental impact. If it is someone who you feel is knowingly violating the law, please call the City of Ottawa at (785) 229-3637 to report the incident.

Question: How can I get involved?

Answer: The City of Ottawa is always looking for new ways to help keep our water clean. If you have any ideas, please contact the Stormwater Coordinator at (785) 229-3637.