



Best Management Practices: Vehicle & Equipment Washing

Seattle is renowned for its beautiful creeks, rivers, lakes and bays. The responsible management of stormwater runoff is crucial to protecting these natural resources. Certain business activities, like vehicle and equipment washing, can unknowingly pollute stormwater runoff and degrade our region's resources. In fact, vehicle wash water often contains harmful pollutants such as oil, grease, detergents, heavy metals, debris and sediments. The Resource Venture is here to help you understand how you can make a difference by washing vehicles and equipment at your facility in a more environmentally friendly way. This fact sheet provides a few smart tips on how to wash vehicles and equipment at your business and help reduce your impact on our region's natural resources.

Did You Know?

The City of Seattle's Municipal Code SMC 22.800 prohibits anything but stormwater from entering the City's storm drain system.

Truth

- Vehicle and equipment wash water often contains pollutants that are harmful to humans and aquatic species.
- Oil, grease, soaps and other cleansers can be fatal to fish and aquatic species, even in small doses.
- Detergents can destroy the delicate tissue on fish gills making it difficult for them to obtain adequate oxygen.
- Pollutants from washing engines, tires and under-carriages are also harmful to aquatic life.
- Commercial washing facilities are a good option because they are environmentally friendly - they treat and dispose of the wash water to the sanitary sewer and often times recycle and reuse the wash water.

Myths

Biodegradable Soaps

Many of the products we use, including oils, grease, soaps and surfactants, are biodegradable and will break down into their stable chemical components over time. Unfortunately though, they are toxic and can be fatal to aquatic species in small doses. Soaps sold as "biodegradable" and "environmentally friendly" are no better for the environment than the average household dishwashing detergent. If your business washes vehicles and equipment, refrain from using soap and look into an appropriate wash water disposal option.

Oil Water Separators

Many businesses have above and below-ground structural devices called oil water separators that help reduce the amount of hydrocarbons entering the sanitary and storm drain systems. Unfortunately, many businesses also use soaps and surfactants during their washing activities which actually break down and emulsify oils. When this occurs, the oil separates into tiny particle sizes that cannot be captured by the separator, rendering it useless.

Combined Sewers

Some areas of Seattle have pipes that collect stormwater, which joins with lines carrying sanitary waste water. This combined water is often treated at the West Point Treatment Plant below Discovery

Myths (continued)

Park. However, during larger rainfall events, these pipes exceed their capacity resulting in combined sewer overflow to Seattle's lakes, bays and rivers. Although it is not required, discharging vehicle and equipment wash water to the combined sewer is discouraged during rain fall events.

Vehicle Washing Tips

What to wash:

Wash only the exterior of your vehicle using cold water. If you plan to wash the engine compartment or undercarriage of a vehicle you may be required to pre-treat the washwater and obtain authorization to discharge to the sanitary sewer from King County Industrial Waste. You can obtain authorization by calling (206) 263-3000.

Where to wash:

- At an enclosed commercial washing facility where proper treatment and disposal of wash water occurs. *Commercial and fleet rates are usually available!*
- Inside a building or other covered area where wash water can be directed to the sanitary sewer.
- Outdoors on a covered, enclosed or contained wash pad constructed specifically for washing activities.
- On a pervious surface or grassy swale where infiltration can occur and there is no runoff to nearby storm drains.

Where to dispose:

- Treat, recycle and reuse the wash water on site using a closed loop recycling system.
- Transport the wash water off-site to an approved treatment and disposal facility.
- Pre-treat and discharge the wash water to the sanitary sewer with approval from King County Industrial Waste.

If you have questions about obtaining authorization to discharge to the sanitary sewer in Seattle please call the King County Industrial Waste Program at (206) 263-3000 or visit their Web site at dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/indwaste.

Who to hire:

There are a number of local mobile washing companies that have the ability to contain, collect and discharge the wash water to an appropriate sanitary connection or haul the waste water off-site to an approved treatment facility. Call the Resource Venture for a list of local contractors that can assist you.

What to watch out for:

Do not wash vehicles and discharge the wash water to the storm drain system – **only rain water can go down a storm drain**. The wash water must go to an approved sanitary sewer. Avoid maintaining vehicles and changing oil near wash areas. You are responsible for stormwater pollution that is generated from your facility, so hire a responsible contractor who knows the rules and can dispose of wash water in accordance with the regulations.

Who to call:

If you have questions about your washing activities you can request an on site consultation from the Resource Venture. The service is free and available to all Seattle businesses. Call us at (206) 389-7304 or inquire by email at help@resourceventure.org.

Additional Information

If you plan on hosting a charity car wash at your business, car wash kits are available from the City of Seattle and King County at no charge. The kits, also referred to as “sump and pump kits”, include a pump, hose, extension cord and signage to advertise that your charity car wash is environmentally sound!

In the City of Seattle, please contact:
Savina Uzunow at (206) 386-9787 or savina.uzunow@seattle.gov. Kits are available at multiple locations in the City for easy pick up.

In King County, please contact:
Lexi Taylor at (206) 296-8287, toll-free at (800) 325-6165 ext. 68287 or lexi.taylor@metrokc.gov.