

Protecting storm drains and our waterways
By Ashland Conservation Commissioner Cara Cruickshank
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Most people think that water going into storm drains gets filtered or cleaned at the wastewater treatment plant before it enters Ashland and Bear Creeks; but sadly, this is not true. Stormwater runoff is a more complicated topic than it appears, even though it's basically rainwater that runs off of hard, impervious surfaces like streets, roofs or parking lots, and then flows into ditches or storm drains. While some larger drain basins may have filters, all the water that flows into a storm drain and picking up contaminants along the way, goes directly into our creeks first, then into the Rogue River, and eventually out to the Pacific. This means that *anything*- like grass, leaves, soap from car washing, rubber from our tires, motor oil, paint, dog poop, fertilizers from lawns, pesticides from gardens, and other pollutants we use every day- *are tragically entering precious waterways and affecting water quality for fish and other wildlife!* The nutrients from fertilizer runoff can cause algae blooms that kill fish by using up all the available oxygen as the algae decays, making it unavailable to the poor fish that suffocate to death in their own watery home. Decaying leaves and grass clippings also use up oxygen, while bacteria and pathogens from animal waste can create health hazards for people. Makes one think twice about dumping anything into storm drains, doesn't it? These are all the reasons why stormwater pollution is the number 1 pollutant in American waterways, and why those blue and silver medallions next to storm drains in town say, "NO DUMPING * DRAINS TO STREAM." They remind us that the distance between your yard and the ocean is as close as the nearest storm drain or ditch. So let's talk about how to be Stream Smart:

Leaves are a real problem for drains, so keeping them out of the street is a simple action that helps improve water quality in streams. Landowners are responsible for disposing of fallen leaves on private property and adjacent sidewalks, so we shouldn't ever blow or rake leaves into streets or ditches. If you hire help, please remind them never to do this either. Compostable bags for disposing of leaves are available for purchase from Recology at 170 Oak Street. The biodegradable bags cost \$14.50 for a set of five, which includes curbside pickup of the bags by Recology. Each bag can hold up to 35 pounds of leaves, so they're worth it. The bags will be picked up on regular garbage collection/green debris and recycling days during *any* month now, not just November-December. Understand that street sweeping is *not* supposed to be a community wide leaf pick-up solution, so everyone can help the health of our streams by keeping leaves out of the street. They make great mulch for your garden beds, and even add valuable carbon to compost piles. Also, wash your car on your lawn or gravel driveway so the dirty water gets filtered as it soaks into the ground, because soapy/oily wash water contaminates streams and rivers. And lastly, ALWAYS scoop dog poop, because fecal matter carries harmful bacteria right into waterways too, which can harm humans as well as marine life.

The fact that contaminated stormwater isn't processed by wastewater treatment plants seems ridiculous, right? That needs to change one day, because *oceans are getting polluted from dirty stormwater in every river, along every coastline, on every continent all over the world.* Human beings have been treating the sea like it's a cesspool for centuries, and if we keep doing this to all the creatures that live there, then we'll lose most marine life all together. ECO SHOCK, on NPR reported recently that *half of all fish species have been wiped out just since 1970*, which is a momentous tragedy for this planet.

Remember that a key part of being *Stream Smart* is knowing that everything going down storm drains flows directly into Bear Creek, the Rogue River, and the ocean without being treated. So

try to allow rainwater to soak into the ground at your home or business and ensure that any stormwater runoff from your property is cool, clean and free of harmful chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Check out these great websites for more information:

City of Ashland stormwater page- www.ashland.or.us/SectionIndex.asp?SectionID=507

and the City's Leaf pick up info- www.ashland.or.us/News.asp?NewsID=3365

The Stream Smart website. Full of stormwater resources, including rainwater catchment and alternatives to pesticides www.stream-smart.com