

Eye on the Environment: Gunk down the gutter comes back

By Arne Anselm
Guest writer

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Remember the not-too-distant past when we thought nothing of using the gutter to get rid of stuff? No time to bag leaves and grass clippings — we used the gutter. Didn't want to wash paint brushes in the sink? We used the gutter. To change the car's oil, we skipped the gutter and dumped it down a storm drain.

We now know how wrong that was. In fact, using the gutter like that is now illegal. Oil, chemicals, fertilizers and trash (even leaves and grass) left in the gutter will make their way into our rivers and eventually out to sea, leaving a trail of contamination that could have serious health and environmental effects.

People are not using the gutter the way they used to, in part because of the Ventura Countywide Stormwater Quality Management Program, a coalition of the Watershed Protection District, Ventura County and the 10 cities working to keep our stormwater clean.

Three years ago, this alliance created a public awareness campaign called "Community for a Clean Watershed." The purpose of the ongoing campaign is to educate the public about ways to help protect the watershed from pollutants. A watershed is the land area, including cities, from which water drains into our local waterways.

Fruits of county efforts

The effort is paying off. Public surveys show an improved awareness of what causes stormwater pollution and positive changes in people's behaviors to prevent pollutants from reaching our watershed and beaches. Here are a few other successes:

- Ventura County beaches are the cleanest in Southern California, according to the environmental nonprofit group Heal the Bay.
- Each fall, an increasing number of Ventura County residents volunteer on Coastal Cleanup Day to collect trash from our beaches and creeks. Even with more people, less trash is collected each year because the public is littering less.
- Parks in every Ventura County city have been equipped with pet waste bags, alerting owners to the importance of cleaning up after their pets and giving them the

means to ensure the waste is disposed of properly.

- The number of reports of people misusing the gutter has gone down as awareness of the negative effects of stormwater pollution grows.

A new community awareness campaign, "Garbage In, Garbage Out," launched through "Community for a Clean Watershed," brings home the point even further that anything exposed to wind and rain can make its way into the gutter. Household trash, pesticides, fertilizers, pet waste and driveway fluids can be washed — unfiltered and untreated — down storm drains flowing into our rivers, lakes and ocean.

Pricey pollution mandate

This campaign is all the more necessary because of potential new state mandates requiring Ventura County agencies to implement dozens of new pollution-control requirements with no additional funding from the state. These proposed mandates include placing screens on storm drains near schools and in all commercial and industrial areas to trap garbage before it enters the storm drain system. Further, the mandates would require, for the first time anywhere, that water coming out of storm drains in Ventura County meet strict pollution standards. If not, the county and cities could face significant fines.

While many of these proposed requirements are worthwhile, local watershed management experts say they need flexibility to use practical, cost-effective ways to control pollution in Ventura County. Currently, about \$13.5 million annually is spent on stormwater quality countywide. The price tag to implement the new requirements could run as high as \$140 million a year.

Because of the potential costs involved, the public's efforts to keep pollutants out of our gutters take on a new urgency. We've made much progress over the years, and with the community's help, we will continue to do so with affordable and manageable stormwater pollution reduction programs.

For more information on how to keep your eye on the environment by keeping our watershed clean, visit www.cleanwatershed.org.

— *Arne Anselm is a county water quality manager. Representatives of government or nonprofit agencies who want to submit articles on environmental topics for this column should contact David Goldstein at 658-4312 or david.goldstein@ventura.org.*



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