

RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

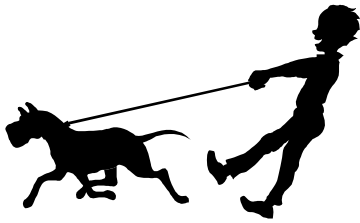
NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

Pet Waste and Water Quality

You are part of the solution!

Susan Lance Scibilia
Program Associate in Water Quality

Theodore B. Shelton, Ph.D.
Specialist in Water Resource Mgt.



Are you like many New Jerseyans who keep animals as pets or even treat them as a member of the family? Do you clean up your pet's waste? If you do, do you dump the waste in the street or storm sewer? Do you leave it to decay on the sidewalk or on the grass near the street? If so, you may be causing pollution or health problems, or be in violation of your municipal ordinances.

Are you polluting New Jersey's lakes and streams?

When it rains, stormwater flows from rooftops, over paved areas, over and into bare soil, and through sloped lawns. As it flows, this runoff can collect and transport potential pollutants, including pet waste, into storm sewers. Contrary to popular belief, storm sewers do not carry stormwater to sewage treatment plants. Instead, most storm sewers drain directly into New Jersey's lakes and rivers, carrying many pollutants along with the water. Animal waste from pets, livestock, and wildlife is a significant source of water pollution in some areas of New Jersey.

Although animal waste is not always a problem, large quantities of untreated animal waste can be troublesome in two ways. First, animal wastes contain nutrients that can promote the growth of algae when they enter streams and

lakes. Second, animal wastes may carry disease causing organisms that can make water unsafe for swimming, drinking, or fishing.

Are you risking your health?

When pet waste is disposed of improperly, not only water quality suffers—your health may be at risk too. Pets, children who play outside, and adults who garden are most at risk for infection from some of the bacteria and parasites found in pet waste. Flies may also spread diseases from animal waste. Diseases that can be transmitted from pet waste to humans include:

Campylobacteriosis—A bacterial infection carried by dogs and cats that frequently causes diarrhea in humans.

Cryptosporidiosis—A parasitic infection that causes diarrhea and abdominal pain.

Giardiasis—A protozoan infection of the small intestine that can cause diarrhea, cramping, fatigue and weight loss.

Salmonellosis—The most common bacterial infection transmitted to humans by other animals. Symptoms include fever, muscle aches, headache, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Toxocariasis—Roundworms usually transmitted from dogs to humans, often without noticeable symptoms, but may cause vision loss, a rash, a fever, or a cough.

Toxoplasmosis—A protozoan parasite carried by cats that can cause birth defects such as mental retardation and blindness if a woman becomes infected during pregnancy; also a problem for people with depressed immune systems. Symptoms include headache, muscle aches, and lymph node enlargement.

Are you in violation of your municipal ordinances?

Many municipalities in New Jersey have “pooper scooper” ordinances that require pet owners to remove pet fecal waste from paved surfaces and public property and dispose of it in the garbage or toilet. In fact, cities around the world have canine laws that impose fines ranging from \$100 in New York City to \$750 in London. In Paris, an estimated 250,000 dogs produce about 25 tons of canine waste every day! In an effort to assist pet owners, many cities have installed plastic-bag dispensers in parks and other public areas.

Sample “Pooper Scooper” Ordinance (Bridgewater Township, N.J.)

“No person owning, harboring, keeping, or in charge of any dog shall cause, suffer, or allow such dog to soil, defile, defecate on or commit any nuisance on any common thoroughfare, sidewalk, passageway, bypath, play area, park, or any place where people congregate or walk...”

What you can do...

Pet waste may not be the largest or most toxic pollutant in urban waterways, but it is one of the many little sources of pollution that add up to

a big problem for water quality. Fortunately, there are some simple things we can do to help keep our water clean. Cleaning up after your pet can be as simple as taking a plastic bag or pooper scooper along on your next walk. What should you do with the waste you pick up? No solution is perfect, but here are the choices:

1. Flush it down the toilet... The water from your toilet goes to a sewage treatment plant or a septic system that removes most pollutants before the water reaches a lake or stream. To prevent plumbing problems, don't try to flush debris such as rocks, sticks, plastic bags or cat litter. Cat feces may be scooped out and flushed down the toilet, but used litter should be put in a securely closed bag in the trash.

2. Bury it in the yard... Dig a hole or trench that is about 5 inches deep, away from vegetable gardens, and away from any lake, stream, ditch, or well. Microorganisms in the top layer of soil will break down the waste and release nutrients to fertilize nearby plants. Be cautious! Keep pet waste away from vegetable gardens and water supplies to prevent disease. Don't add pet waste to your compost pile. The pile won't get hot enough to kill disease organisms in pet waste.

3. Put it in the trash... This may be easy, but it is not the best solution. Waste taken to a landfill or incinerator can still cause pollution problems.

If you would like additional information on how to protect water quality around your home, request the Home*A*Syst workbook from your local office of Rutgers Cooperative Extension (you can find the phone number in the blue pages of your phone book under County Government).

Sources:

The New York Times, November 1, 1995, page A4.
USEPA, Office of Water, "Guidance Specifying Management Measures for Sources of Nonpoint Pollution in Coastal Waters."

