

Stormwater and Pollution

Stormwater is the water that enters the landscape during periods of precipitation, snow and ice melt. Clean stormwater is good for the environment and our communities; it replenishes aquifers for drinking water and supports recreation areas. In natural landscapes, stormwater flows along watersheds where it gets absorbed by vegetation, percolates into the ground, and flows into creeks, rivers and streams, eventually ending up in lakes and coastal waters. But in cityscapes, where natural watersheds are mostly paved over; stormwater flows along impervious surfaces like buildings, streets, and sidewalks where it accumulates pollutants that have built up. Some of these pollutants include trash, motor oil from leaky vehicles, fertilizer, pet waste, and even soapy water from a car wash. When these pollutants get picked up stormwater, they also can harm wildlife and human health.

The Role of the City and You

San Francisco is the only coastal city in California served primarily by a combined sewer system. This means wastewater and stormwater are cleaned and treated before being discharged into receiving waters. However, there are small areas in the City with separate stormwater sewer pipes. In these areas, stormwater flows into receiving waters without being treated, bringing pollutants into our waterways. These areas are called Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) areas and are dispersed throughout the City in neighborhoods that border the Bay and ocean. To help keep our waters healthy, we need residents of San Francisco to do their part in stormwater pollution prevention.

Common Stormwater Pollutants

Automobile: motor oil, gasoline, antifreeze, car batteries, automotive fluid leaks, carwash water, vehicle emissions

Lawn and Garden: bare and eroded soil, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, fertilizer

Construction: construction waste and debris

Household: cleaning products, paints and solvents, pharmaceuticals, garbage and recycling

Pets: animal waste left on the street, flea and tick medicine



What Are Some Things You Can Do?

- Don't dump anything down the storm drain and report any illegal dumping by calling 311 or at sf311.org. You can go to a hazardous waste recycling center to properly dispose of any household chemicals. To find a hazardous waste disposal site near you, visit recyclewhere.org.
- Keeping storm drains clear of trash and debris is important; even seemingly harmless materials like leaves and yard waste can contribute to neighborhood flooding and pollution of our local waterways. To help, you can become a designated drain steward in your neighborhood and sign up to [Adopt a Drain](https://adoptadrain.sfwater.org/) at <https://adoptadrain.sfwater.org/>.
- Use alternative transportation whenever possible. If you drive, remember to keep your car maintained. Fix any leaks and clean up any spills. Use a drip pan underneath any existing leaks to prevent stormwater from carrying motor oil and other hazardous chemicals into the storm drain.
- It is best to wash your car at a commercial carwash. Federal law requires commercial carwashes to treat their wastewater and to have special equipment to reduce water waste. If you do wash your car at home, remember to use less-toxic and biodegradable soaps that are phosphate-free. Also, use a hose with a shut-off valve to control water waste. If you can, park your car on a surface that will help reduce runoff, like a lawn or gravel. If you want to learn more, visit sfwater.org/pollutionprevention.
- Always pick up after your pet. If possible, use biodegradable bags. Pet waste that gets into stormwater is a big contributor to bacterial contamination in our waterways.
- Use less-toxic products when gardening. Spot treat your weeds and avoid applying pesticides and herbicides before it rains. Please visit ourwaterourworld.org to learn more about chemical alternatives and how to conserve water while gardening.
- Plant a garden or container bed with native, drought-tolerant plants. Drought-tolerant plants are specifically adapted to low water environments. This means you'll be conserving water and preventing runoff from entering storm drains! For plant recommendations go to sfplantfinder.org.
- Support businesses that have a registered SF Green Business Seal of Approval. Check out sfenvironment.org/green-businesses to find participating retailers.

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