

Animal Waste and Water Quality



Animal waste is one of the many little sources of pollution that can add up to big problems for water quality and may cause human health problems as well. While most people connect animal waste problems to agriculture, studies have shown that pets, waterfowl and other urban wildlife waste can cause significant water pollution problems.

Animal waste contains several types of pollutants that contribute to water quality problems: nutrients, pathogens and a naturally toxic material, ammonia. When animal waste ends up in a lake or stream, it decomposes, using up oxygen and releasing its pollutant load. During summer months when the water is warm, the combination of low oxygen levels and ammonia can kill fish and other aquatic organisms. The nutrients cause excessive growth of aquatic weeds and algae. When these conditions make the water murky green and smelly, or when the surface of the water is completely covered with a thick mat of vegetation, the area becomes unattractive or unusable for swimming, boating or fishing.

Pathogens, the disease-causing bacteria and viruses associated with animal waste, can also make water unsafe for human use. If pathogens or the indicator bacteria associated with animal waste are found during water testing, shellfish beds may be closed to harvest, beaches may be closed to swimming and drinking water supplies may require expensive filtration or disinfection.

Fortunately, there are some simple practices everyone can do to help prevent pollution by keeping animal waste out of the water.

Keeping Animal Waste Out of the Water

1. Pick up after your pet. Preventing water pollution can be as simple as remembering to take along a plastic bag or pooper-scooper when you walk your dog. For both “quality of life” and public health reasons, many communities actually have laws requiring anyone taking their animal off of their property to immediately clean up the waste after the pet relieves itself.
2. Keep your yard clean. While there are no laws requiring you to clean up animal waste on your own property, there are good reasons to be careful where you leave it to decay. Some diseases can be transmitted from pet waste to humans through soil contact.
3. Don't feed waterfowl. While one of the pleasures of a trip to the park has always been taking stale bread to feed the ducks, the environmental and health impacts of this activity for both humans and birds can be serious. While ducks, geese and swans all love bread, it lacks in the nutrients and roughage of their natural diet. Feeding waterfowl also tends to cause the birds to concentrate in numbers higher than can be supported by the natural food supplies. This can cause problems in the winter months when fewer people come to the park or shore with food. There have been cases where swans were so used to being fed at a particular location that they remained in the area long after the feeding stopped, became too weak to fly someplace with a better food supply, and eventually died of starvation.

These large flocks of birds also create large quantities of waste and the serious water pollution problems described earlier in this fact sheet.

4. Dispose of kitty litter properly. When cleaning out the litter box, a two-step approach is most effective. Cat waste may be scooped out and flushed down the toilet, and the used litter should be bagged, sealed and placed in the trash. Dumping the entire contents of the litter box down your toilet will cause plumbing problems and prematurely fill up your septic tank or sewer system with indigestible material, but sending untreated cat waste to the landfill can cause pollution problems.

To learn more or report possible illegal discharges to the storm drain system, call the Village of Beecher at 708-946-2261.

(Source: Clean Water Fact Sheet, produced by NEMO and Sea Grant Connecticut)