
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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Car Washes and Water Quality

Community car washes are a popular fundraising activity for many organizations across the state. Few people realize, however, that this method of raising money can adversely impact groundwater and surface water quality. Depending on the location of the community car wash, pollutants such as detergents, oil, grease, salt, gasoline and metals can infiltrate to contaminate groundwater or drain directly to surface water bodies through storm drains and catch basins. The untreated wash water can harm plants and animals that live in streams, rivers and lakes. For this reason, unpermitted community car wash discharges are in violation of both federal and state water pollution control laws. Because cost and delays make permitting unrealistic, other options should be investigated.



Photo Credit: Washington State Department of Ecology, used with permission.

Before organizing a community car wash, NHDES strongly recommends that you consider using other fundraising methods. If you still decide to hold a community car wash event, please consider one of the following options, in this order of preference:

- **Hold your event at a commercial car wash.** Partnerships can be created with local commercial car washes to use their facilities, or to sell tickets good for a car wash at their location. Commercial car washes use much less water than community car washes, and the wash water is typically treated and discharged to a municipal sewer system, where the water receives additional treatment before being discharged to surface waters.
- **Contact your local wastewater treatment facility.** Before the car wash event, organizations should contact their local sewer district to determine if the water can be discharged to a sanitary sewer or a combined sewer. In some towns and cities, there may be catch basins or garage drains (public works or commercial garages) that are connected to the sewer system. If so, holding car washes in these locations is desirable. Otherwise, you may be able to arrange with the sewer district to create a basin or sump and route your wastewater to a sewer manhole.

- **Contact a licensed septage hauler.** In areas without a sewer or in communities without wastewater treatment facilities, the wastewater may be pumped by a licensed septage hauler from a plugged catch basin and trucked to a nearby wastewater treatment facility. In this case, permission must be obtained from the wastewater treatment facility where the wastewater is to be hauled and the local public works or highway department should be contacted for assistance in plugging the catch basin.
- **Conduct the car wash on a permeable surface.** Surface water impacts will be minimal if you hold your car wash on a ball field or gravel area, where the water will infiltrate into the ground. Care should be taken to avoid areas within a wellhead protection area or other well recharge areas because of pollution concerns. Obviously, this option and the one below would not be feasible during the winter when the ground is frozen.
- **Direct water toward a vegetated area and away from storm drains and other surface waters.** If the washing must take place on a hard surface, water must be directed away from areas that drain to surface waters. To accomplish this, storm drains can be sealed and a pump can be used to direct the water to a level, grassy area where there is enough room for all of the water to infiltrate.

These are important not just for community fundraisers but also your personal car!

In all cases, community car wash or your own car, organizations and homeowners should adhere to the following guidelines:

- ✓ Wash the exterior of the vehicle only. Engine, undercarriage and transmission washing is prohibited.
- ✓ Use regular low-pressure garden hoses. Nozzles should be attached to all hoses to conserve water and to provide some additional pressure. Nozzles with automatic shut-offs should be used to conserve water.
- ✓ Use non-toxic, biodegradable and phosphate-free cleaners. Soaps and detergents should be used sparingly. Avoid using degreasing products, solvents and tire cleaner products. If there is a question whether a cleaning product is a potential contaminant, the NHDES Groundwater Recharge Program can review the product ingredient – contact the Groundwater Recharge Program at (603) 271-2858.
- ✓ Cold water is recommended – aquatic life can be killed by sudden changes in temperature.

For More Information:

- EPA's Wash Your Car the Right Way brochure: https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/KSMO_CarWashing.pdf
- EPA's Community PSA Handout: <https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/psatautowash.pdf>
- State of Washington Department of Ecology's Washington Waters – Ours to Protect: <https://ecology.wa.gov/About-us/Get-involved/What-you-can-do/Washington-Waters-ours-to-protect>
- NHDES' Drinking Water and Groundwater Bureau: <https://www.des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/dwgb/index.htm> or dwgbinfo@des.nh.gov
- NDHES' Watershed Management Bureau: <https://www.des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/index.htm> or ted.diers@des.nh.gov