FACT Sheet

MANAGEMENT OF CLEANING WASTEWATER

This fact sheet addresses the management of water used to clean vehicles, equipment and structures. Following a cleaning event, such water is considered "wastewater" that must be managed to prevent pollution to streams, lakes, and other water bodies. Pennsylvania's Clean Streams Law prohibits the discharge of substances causing pollution to waters of the Commonwealth without a permit. Waters of the Commonwealth include surface waters, groundwaters and storm sewers. The purpose of this fact sheet is to describe acceptable methods of managing cleaning wastewaters without the need for a permit from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

What substances used in or resulting from cleaning operations could cause pollution?

The ingredients contained in soaps, car wash, degreasers, and related cleaning agents have the potential to adversely affect waters of the Commonwealth. Substances such as solids, oil and grease removed because of cleaning may also cause pollution, and the wastewater could contain other pollutants such as metals and other toxic materials, depending on the object being cleaned. The cleaning wastewater is a pollutant regardless of whether the detergents used are labeled eco-friendly, biodegradable or natural.

What are acceptable methods for managing cleaning wastewaters?

The best approach for managing cleaning wastewater is to collect the wastewater at the location where cleaning is performed and reuse/recycle the wastewater or otherwise dispose of the wastewater into a public sewer system or at a sewage treatment facility. A permit is generally not necessary for reusing or recycling wastewater, but approval from the owner of a sewer system or sewage treatment facility may be required.

The discharge of pollutants to groundwater requires a permit from DEP under Pennsylvania's Clean Streams Law. For example, a commercial car wash that frequently discharges some or all of its cleaning wastewater to the ground surface would usually require a permit. However, using its discretion, DEP does not generally require a permit for the discharge of cleaning wastewater to the ground surface if such discharges are not routine, are directed into vegetated areas and do not contain chemicals that would cause groundwater pollution. For example, wastewater resulting from the cleaning of non-commercial vehicles every few months could be directed to a well-vegetated area that allows infiltration into the ground without obtaining a permit. Therefore, if collection of wastewaters for reuse/recycling or disposal into a sewer system is not feasible, discharge to a vegetated area of the ground surface can be an acceptable alternative if the practice does not cause pollution and is done infrequently.

Discharges of cleaning wastewater to storm sewers generally should be avoided. In some cases, avoiding discharges to storm sewers may be difficult in urban areas. Where no other alternative exists, discharge to storm sewers may be acceptable if cleaning agents are not used and the discharge is infrequent, such as car washing at a residence.

In summary the options for managing cleaning wastewaters are, in order of preference:

1. Collect wastewater and reuse or recycle it.
2. Disposal to a public sewer system with the approval of the system owner either by collecting the wastewater for transport to a sewage treatment facility or by directly discharging to a public sewer system.
3. If the generation of cleaning wastewater is infrequent, direct the wastewater into a well-vegetated ground surface area for infiltration.
4. If the generation of cleaning wastewater is infrequent, cleaning agents are not used, and where vegetated ground surface areas are not available, the wastewater may be discharged to storm sewers.
5. Obtain a permit from DEP for routine discharges to surface waters, especially from a piped outfall, and for routine land application of the wastewater.

Do non-profit organizations that hold car washes to raise money need a permit?

No organization is required to obtain a DEP permit if one of the alternatives discussed in this fact sheet is used to manage the wastewater.

May chemicals (e.g., strong acids or caustics) be used to clean houses and other residences?

Yes, as long as the wastewater is captured and collected or otherwise prevented from entering waters of the Commonwealth, including storm sewers.

While cleaning residences, if not using harsh chemicals, may the wastewater run off the property untreated?

If the cleaning is infrequent, the wastewater is directed into a well-vegetated ground surface area for infiltration and the wastewater will not run off into surface waters of the Commonwealth, this practice may be acceptable. If any type of cleaning agent is used, regardless of its nature (i.e., biodegradable, natural, ecofriendly), allowing the wastewater to flow into storm sewers is generally unacceptable.

May cleaning wastewater be discharged to onlot septic systems?

No, cleaning wastewater is generally considered industrial waste and should not be discharged to onlot systems.

May cleaning wastewaters generated at commercial or industrial facilities be managed in accordance with this fact sheet?

Industrial facilities must follow the regulations for stormwater associated with industrial facilities that include requirements for housekeeping and cleaning. Commercial establishments should contact the DEP Regional Office for any requirements specific to the cleaning activity occurring at the facility.

Could someone who causes pollution due to cleaning wastewater be penalized?

If DEP determines that the management of cleaning wastewaters has caused pollution to waters of the Commonwealth, the responsible party could be liable for civil penalties up to $10,000 per day under the Clean Streams Law.

For questions, contact the Clean Water Program in DEP's regional offices (visit DEP's website at www.dep.pa.gov and select Contact Us) or contact:

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For more information, visit www.dep.pa.gov.