

Pet waste and Stormwater

Over the last 18 years of presenting programs about non-point source pollution we have talked about pet waste and the harmful effects on water quality. The awareness and practice of picking up your pet's waste has increased significantly over the years. Ten years ago when we would ask a classroom of students to raise their hand if they had a dog and keep it raised if they picked up the dog's poop, only a quarter of those students would keep their hand up. Now, 90% of the students say that they or their parents pick up their dog's waste. The increase in awareness has come from campaigns from local governments and organizations. At most parks you will find pet waste stations with pet waste bags and disposal containers. Most people today with a pet pick up after them but don't fully know why, so let us explain.

The reason that it is important to pick up after your pet is that the waste contains not only bacteria but nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus. If the pet waste is not picked up and properly disposed of it ends up in the storm drain. Storm drains carry all runoff to the closest waterway. According to EPA, "storm water runoff is generated from rain and snowmelt events that flow over land or impervious surfaces, such as paved streets, parking lots, and building rooftops, and does not soak into the ground. The runoff picks up pollutants like trash, chemicals, oils, and dirt/sediment that can harm our rivers, streams, lakes, and coastal waters." The excess bacteria and nutrients impacts the overall water quality. It may lead to increased plant growth, ultimately resulting in algae blooms. Over time, living and dead plant material builds up and, combined with sediments, fills in lakes and reservoirs. This is a naturally occurring process called eutrophication. However, when excess nutrients and sediment are added as a result of human activity, the speed of this natural process is increased significantly. All the stormwater runoff from Cherokee County ultimately ends up in Lake Allatoona. No one wants to swim, fish, kayak, paddleboard and boat in water with excess bacteria! If water with excess bacteria gets into your ears, nose or mouth, it can make you sick. There are numerous types of bacteria but the type we are concerned about is coliform. Coliform bacteria generally originate in the intestines of warm-blooded animals. Typical symptoms of illness associated with fecal coliform pathogens are minor, such as upset stomach, diarrhea, ear infections, and rashes. These symptoms are minor but not pleasant. Reduction of these bacteria can easily be avoided by the simple action of proper clean-up and disposal of your pet's waste.

Proper clean-up & disposal –

*Picking up the pet waste and putting it in a plastic bag. Then disposing of it in a pet waste container or in your trash can.

Improper clean-up & disposal –

* Not picking it up the pet waste

* Picking up the pest waste and putting it in a plastic bags. Then leaving that bag on the sidewalk, in the road, on a storm drain cover, on the electrical boxes or in the right of way.

***Please note that picking up your dog waste and putting it in a plastic bag is only the first step. If you leave that bag behind, you have now added the pollutants from the pet waste and additional plastic pollution.**