

Q: What is a catch basin or storm drain?

A: A catch basin or storm drain is a curbside drain with the sole function of collecting rainwater from our properties and streets and transporting it to local waterways through a system of underground piping, culverts and/or drainage ditches. Storm drains can also be found in parking lots and serve the same purpose. In county and city areas, that water never goes to the sewer treatment plant to be cleaned, but flows directly into our creeks, rivers, sloughs and bay.

Q: Are sewers and storm drains the same things?

A: Not in Humboldt County. Sewers and storm drains are two completely different drainage systems. Sewers carry wastewater from such things as washing machines, sinks, toilets, and showers to a treatment plant to be cleaned prior to being discharged into the ocean. The storm drain system collects rainwater, and anything else dumped into it, and carries it all directly to our local waterways with no treatment.

Q: Who maintains the storm drain system?

A: In most areas within the County, the local municipalities maintain both the sewer system and the storm drain system. CalTrans maintains the storm drains on state highways.

Q: Do catch basins and storm drains get cleaned out?

A: Yes. Local municipalities regularly perform maintenance activities; including cleaning, of the storm drain system. In addition, crews are always available to respond to emergency situations where clogged storm drains result in flooding.

Q: Why aren't all storm drains cleaned out before a storm?

A: Crews clean out clogged catch basins throughout the year as part of on-going maintenance. Unfortunately, there are just too many catch basins and not enough time. Residents can reduce flooding in their neighborhoods by keeping material out of the storm drain system or clean debris around the catch basin when performing landscape maintenance.

Q: Why don't local municipalities install filters or screens in front of catch basins?

A: Filters are very expensive and require a lot of maintenance. Screens sound like a good idea, but during a rainstorm, debris (e.g. leaves, sticks, trash) is quickly swept to the catch basin and any screen device placed in front of the catch basin would clog the grate resulting in flooding.

Q: Why isn't a net/fence/barrier installed at the end of the storm drain channel to catch all of the trash?

A: Unfortunately, nets only catch larger pieces of the trash — all of the pollutants like pet waste, used oil, pesticides, fertilizers, etc., flow through the net and straight into our waterways.

Q: Why doesn't local municipalities build a stormwater treatment facility?

A: Such a facility would be extremely expensive to build and maintain, and these costs would need to be passed on to property owners.

Q: What kinds of pollutants are found in the storm drain system?

A: Paint thinner and paint products, motor oil, pesticides, trash, paper, human and animal feces, antifreeze, leaves, grass clippings, cooking oil, shopping carts, tires, dirty diapers, and dead animals are but a few of the pollutants found in the system.

Q: When was the storm system built? Why?

A: The storm drain system is built as the land is developed. This is done to insure that as new development occurs, proper drainage is provided.

Q: What are local municipalities doing about illegal dumping?

A: Local municipalities will investigate all reports of dumping of material into the storm drain system. If you see something stormwater related that seems questionable, let us know and we'll investigate the situation. Call your area's Stormwater Hotline immediately.

Q: I see people dumping their used oil into storm drains all the time. What can I do?

A: Dumping used oil is illegal. One quart of motor oil can pollute 250,000 gallons of drinking water. To report the problem, call your area's hotline.

Used oil should be taken to a nearby gas station or auto parts dealer that accepts used oil. Not only will used motor oil be kept out the stormwater system, but the oil will be processed and can be used again as re-refined oil. To find the nearest dealer who will accept used oil contact the Eureka Community Recycling Center at (707)442.2541.

Q: What should I do if I see a neighbor throwing trash into a storm drain?

A: The storm drain system is for the sole purpose of collecting rainwater overflow. Dumping trash, pollutants and debris in the catch basins is illegal and is a federal violation of the Clean Water Act of 1972, as well as the local ordinances. A neighbor may not understand the catch basin's direct connection to our waterways. It may be just a matter of making them aware of its environmental impact.

Q: How can I properly dispose of left-over paints, thinners, chemicals, car batteries, etc.?

A: Call the Household Hazardous Waste Hotline at (707)441-2005.

Q: I wash my own car. How can I be environmentally responsible?

A: One option is to have vehicles cleaned at a commercial car wash where wastewater flows through sand and oil traps then into the sanitary sewer system. When washing your car at home, pull it up on the lawn or graveled area where water will leach into the ground instead of flowing into gutter and storm drains. Always use phosphate-free, biodegradable soaps when washing a vehicle and conserve as much water as possible. Shut off water while washing your car, then rinse. Remember not to leave your car on the lawn. We would highly recommend going to a full or self service car wash because the used water is recycled.

Q: Yard clippings and leaves are natural, so they don't cause any problems, right?

A: Wrong. Grass clippings, leaves and yard clippings that are repeatedly swept into catch basins can clog the drain, causing flooding and becoming a potential breeding ground for rodents and insects. Additionally, when this material reaches our waterways, it decomposes and robs the surrounding water of oxygen that is needed for aquatic life.

Q: Is there a fine/penalty for illegal dumping?

A: Yes. The fine will vary depending on which local or state agency assesses the fine.

Q: I have often seen stencils or placards over the catch basins. How can I get them for a catch basin near me?

A: The storm drain stencils and placards are part of the outreach efforts of local municipalities. Local youth groups, civic organizations, school clubs, and other interested groups are welcome to take part in this community service effort. Materials will be provided for the project by the municipality. The municipality will work with the group in deciding locations for the stenciling project.

For more information on these and other outreach programs, please contact the Miles Slattery at (707)441-4184, or e-mail msslattery@ci.eureka.ca.gov.