



Pet Waste Management

Considerations for the Selection and Use of Pet Waste Collection Systems in Public Areas

Issue

The Department of Ecology has identified fecal coliform bacteria pollution as a major problem in Washington State surface waters. Bacteria are the most common pollutant in state waters, affecting at least thirty percent of the state's impaired waterbodies. The sources of bacteria vary with location. In urban watersheds, pet wastes are a major factor. Properly locating, installing, and maintaining pet waste collection systems are the best first step for addressing the problem of animal waste in public areas.

What are fecal coliform bacteria?

Fecal coliform are a group of bacteria found in the feces of warm-blooded animals such as people, livestock, pets, and wildlife. Excessive levels of bacteria indicate an increased risk of gastroenteric illnesses such as upset stomach, diarrhea, and infections from pathogenic bacteria and viruses. Nutrients in water typically associated with fecal matter also deplete oxygen in water that is needed by fish and other aquatic life. Fecal coliform levels must be kept in check to ensure that streams and lakes are safe for people. Using national averages and assuming that the average dog generates a mere quarter pound of feces a day, a watershed of 100,000 persons has over two and a half tons of feces deposited in it each day...that's almost 2 million pounds per year!

What are Pet Waste Collection Systems?

Pet waste collection systems are small structures located where pet owners need them most. Local parks are the most common place to put them, but other areas that are used by pet owners to exercise their pets might need one too.

Pet waste stations usually provide an educational message, instructions for proper use, plastic bags for picking up waste, and a garbage can for disposal. There are commercial vendors that manufacture the dispensers, signs, and bags in a variety of sizes and for different applications.

Based upon local preferences and other needs, some organizations will build their own stations. This allows stations to be specifically designed to fit budgetary constraints, or to be consistent with unique natural settings.



How much will it cost?

There are several cost factors when implementing a pet waste management system. First is the cost of pet waste station itself. A simple bag dispenser is about \$60. Based on its size, support structure, and durability characteristics, some full service units can cost several hundred dollars. Installation of the units is relatively simple and can be done with in-house or volunteer labor. Pickup bags are purchased in bulk for 5-14 cents each. In some custom systems such as the one shown on the right, plastic vegetable bags from the local grocery store are used to reduce costs. The unit shown is made out of a recycled plastic/wood composite material for long life and low or no maintenance.



The cost of picking up the pet waste, restocking bags, and miscellaneous maintenance can only be quantified on a case by case basis. Frequently, these activities are easily integrated with current ground maintenance activities.

Will this solve the bacterial pollution problem in local creeks?

Pet waste stations are probably best used in conjunction with other strategies to reduce bacteria levels in local waters. The development of an educational campaign is highly recommended as are the development of local ordinances and enforcement resources. In some watersheds, it may be necessary to institute other animal waste control efforts to control bacterial pollution. Where septic tanks are present in the watershed, the identification of failing systems is a vital component of an effective overall plan. Where small farms are present, outreach education through the local conservation district is essential.

Studies have shown that about half of all dog owners walk their dogs in public areas. Up to 40 percent do not pick up after their pets. While studies show that pet waste is a significant pollution source in the Puget Sound area, surveys have shown that citizens do not believe that it is an important water pollution problem.

The ability of pet waste collection systems to decrease fecal coliform levels has never been precisely quantified. However, DNA fingerprinting techniques have clearly shown pet waste to be a major contributor of bacteria in urban and suburban watersheds. Only within the last 5 to 10 years have local governments began focusing on the control of pet wastes for reasons other than being a public nuisance. With the new focus on nonpoint pollution across the nation, more information will become available in the future. In the meantime, Ecology is recommending that local government and others rely on existing studies and common sense to support the initiation of pet waste collection systems in their jurisdictions where pet walking areas may be contributing to pollution through stormwater runoff.