Five Easy Steps to a Cleaner Puget Sound

Small actions by each of us can make big changes in the health of Puget Sound. We would all love to help improve the health of our marine waters by installing rain gardens, or replacing our lawns with native plants and vegetation. And many of us would like to remove our bulkheads and install soft-shore armoring to replicate a more natural beach habitat. But that is not always possible, due to tight budgets and time constraints. There are a lot of small steps each of us can take on a daily basis, however, that can cumulatively make a big difference in the health of our Sound, and can be done quickly and economically. This newsletter will suggest five of those steps that you can take beginning this spring and summer, some of which can be accomplished as soon as this weekend.

Where Does Your Rainwater Go?

You may have cleaned your gutters this past summer, in preparation for the fall and winter rains. But when was the last time you checked to see where your roof runoff drained to once it left your downspouts? For many of us, the downspout runoff is diverted away from our foundations by splashblocks, with the water draining into our yard. If you have a septic system, however, this can be a problem. The drain field will not work well if it is oversaturated with surface water, so be certain that it is not in the path of your downspout runoff. By simply moving the splash blocks so that they do not divert the water over the drain field, you can help ensure your septic system is functioning properly, and that pollution does not run off into the Sound.

If you live on a bluff, you should also make sure that your roof runoff from the splashblocks is not being diverted towards the bluff face. Even if it soaks into the soils before reaching the edge of the bluff, the extra weight of saturated soils near the bluff can cause erosion or slide problems. If you have runoff being diverted to a tightline that runs over the bluff and channels the water to the beach, be sure that you check the tightline at least twice a year, at the beginning of fall and the end of winter, to make sure that it has not had any damage from winter storms or slides. Often this can occur without your knowledge, resulting in severe damage to your bluff. The photo at right, taken on Camano Island, shows how a fallen tree has ripped away the tightline, allowing the runoff to drain onto the bluff face, causing the slide damage shown near top of photo. You can prevent this from happening by simply checking for damage to your tightline on a periodic basis.
Clean Car Choices

When a car is washed on pavement, whether it is your driveway or at a fundraiser being held in a parking lot, all of the detergents, automotive fluids, road grime, and heavy metals from brake pad dust flow into a storm drain and eventually ends up in Puget Sound, harming marine life. Commercial car washes, on the other hand, have filtration systems that clean and recirculate the water, making them the preferable fish-friendly choice when your car needs washing. If you like to wash the car yourself, you should do so over the lawn or other pervious surface, rather than in the driveway.

Septic / Sewer Suggestions

Several past issues of the newsletter have focused on septic system information, the latest one in 2010:


A septic system is dependent on millions of naturally occurring bacteria throughout the system in order to operate properly. Daily, we add many beneficial bacteria to our septic systems; bacteria typically found in wastewater, our bodies, and other waste materials we dispose of. The use of "antibacterial," "disinfectant," or "sanitizing" products in the home can and do destroy both good and bad bacteria in septic treatment systems. Excessive use of these products in the home can cause significant and even total destruction of the bacteria population. Normally, the use of any single product or single application will not cause major problems. However, the cumulative effect of using too many such products and excessive application may cause serious problems and damage to the septic system. The list of potentially damaging products include sink/counter top cleaners; tub, tile and shower cleaners; drain cleaners; toilet bowl cleaners; laundry bleach products; and many industrial strength cleaners.

Again, you don’t have to drastically change your practices to make a difference. One change you can do right away is to not use liquid soaps that have “anti-bacterial” on the label. Washing your hands with bar soap and warm water should be just as good, but if you prefer liquid hand soaps, there are products on the market that do not kill the bacteria in your septic tank. Ivory is just one brand that does not add anti-bacterial ingredients, yet does a fine job of cleaning your hands. Another quick step is to not use “every flush” toilet cleaners, typically placed in your tank. Cleaning your toilet when needed takes a little more time, but saves a lot of expense when compared to a failed septic system.

For those who are on sewer systems, avoid using cleaning products that have microplastics as one of their ingredients, and avoid washing polar fleece blankets, vests and sweaters in your washing machine. These microplastics and microfibers bypass the filtration systems of most sewage treatment plants, and are mistaken for food by smaller organisms in the marine food chain.
See the October/November 2011 newsletter for more information on microplastics and their harmful effect on our marine environment: http://county.wsu.edu/kitsap/nrs/water/Documents/Shore%20Stewards%20Newsletters/November%202011%20Shore%20Stewards.pdf

If you are on a septic system, place the waste in the trash that goes to the landfill. The goal is to prevent the waste from contaminating surface water. It is legal to bag your dog waste and put it in the garbage can.

Double bagging the poop is a courtesy to garbage haulers. Don’t worry about buying the biodegradable plastic bags – nothing degrades in the landfill – not even food and newspapers. This is a great way to reuse all of those plastic bags that come with us! For more information, see the April 2010 newsletter at http://county.wsu.edu/kitsap/nrs/water/Documents/Shore%20Stewards%20Newsletters/2010%20April%20SS%20Dog_Waste%20newsletter.pdf

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