

MANAGEMENT OF CLEANING WASTEWATER

This fact sheet addresses the management of water used for the purpose of cleaning 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. 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 result 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. Particles removed as a result of cleaning may also cause pollution, and such particles could contain pollutants such as metals. Other substances such as oil and grease, if washed into water bodies, can also cause pollution.

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 not generally necessary for reusing or recycling wastewater, but approval from the owner of a sewer system or sewage treatment facility may be necessary.

Waters of the Commonwealth includes groundwater. The discharge of pollutants to groundwater requires a permit from DEP under Pennsylvania’s Clean Streams Law. 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 trucks every few months could be directed to a well-vegetated area that will promote infiltration through the ground without a permit. A commercial car wash that frequently discharges some or all of its cleaning wastewater to the ground surface would usually require a permit. Therefore, if collection of wastewaters for reuse/recycling or disposal into a sewer system is considered infeasible, 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.

Waters of the Commonwealth also includes storm sewers. Discharges of cleaning wastewater to storm sewers should generally be avoided. In some cases it may be difficult to avoid discharges to storm sewers, such as car washing by residents in cities. Where no other alternative exists, it may be acceptable to discharge to storm sewers if cleaning agents are not used and the discharge is infrequent. If possible, direct the wastewater first into a vegetated area before allowing the wastewater to enter storm sewers.

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

1. Collect wastewater and reuse or recycle it.
2. Collect wastewater for transport to a sewage treatment facility or discharge 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, vegetated ground surface areas are not available and cleaning agents are not used, discharge the wastewater to storm sewers.

5. Obtain a permit from DEP for routine discharges directly to surface waters 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 the wastewater does not enter waters of the Commonwealth and if one of the alternatives discussed in this fact sheet are used to manage the wastewater.

May chemicals (e.g., strong acids or caustics) be used to clean buildings?

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

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

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

May cleaning wastewater from car washes or other facilities be discharged to on-lot septic systems?

No, cleaning wastewater is considered industrial waste and should not generally be discharged to onlot systems. However, such wastewater may be discharged into public sewer systems with the authorization of the owner of the sewer system.

May 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 Regional Resources) or contact:

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