



Maryland Department of the
Environment

FACTS ABOUT: CAR WASHING FUNDRAISERS

Car wash fundraisers are a popular means of raising money for worthwhile causes, such as scout troops, sport teams, school clubs, and charities. However, the runoff from washing cars, if not properly managed, can negatively impact the aquatic environment and degrade local waterways. When conducting your fundraiser, you should follow these guidelines in order to prevent the wash water from entering storm drains where it may flow untreated to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

HOW DOES RUNOFF FROM CAR WASH FUNDRAISERS HARM THE CHESAPEAKE BAY AND THE ENVIRONMENT?

When washing cars in a paved area, the wash water, which contains soap, detergent, and residues from exhaust fumes, brake pads, gasoline, and motor oil, washes off the cars and flows off the pavement and into nearby storm drains (usually openings in the curb or gutter). Unlike the water we use in our homes and businesses, which is treated at wastewater treatment plants, requirements to control storm drain discharges in Maryland have only been in effect since 1986. Any storm drain system constructed before this time probably discharges directly into rivers, streams, and the Chesapeake Bay without any kind of treatment. Soap and detergents (even biodegradable ones) can be poisonous to crabs, oysters, and rockfish, damaging gills and depleting the water of oxygen. A single fundraising event can pour thousands of gallons of soapy, oily, and gritty water into your local stream.

BAY FRIENDLY TIP

Consider holding your car washing fundraiser at a commercial car wash. Wash water from commercial car washes goes to sewage treatment plants rather than down a storm drain. Call your local car wash to ask if they offer fundraising options for schools, teams, and charities.

PLANNING A LOW IMPACT CAR WASH FUNDRAISER

If you choose not to partner with a commercial car wash, try to incorporate these practices to reduce the overall environmental impact of your fundraiser:

- Selecting the site for your car wash is very important. When talking to the property owners of shopping centers, schools, or churches where you are considering holding the event, ask where the water flows from the storm drains on the property. The best



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locations will have some stormwater management controls in place. These controls include grass swales, sand filters, oil and grit separators, storm water management ponds, and wetlands that treat storm water before it is discharged to a stream.

- If the property does not have stormwater management controls in place, choose a site where the wash water can soak into grass, gravel, or be diverted to nearby landscaping. This will allow the wash water to filter through the vegetation and/or soil instead of flowing directly into a storm drain. Absorbent pads, which can be purchased at automotive shops, can also be placed in the curb or grass swale to catch oils and other chemicals.
- Remove all trash and debris from the car washing area.
- Do not use acid based wheel cleaners or engine degreasers.
- Use only soaps, cleaners, or detergents labeled “non-toxic,” “chlorine-free”, “phosphate-free,” or “biodegradable.” The safest products for the environment are vegetable-based or citrus-based products. Using biodegradable soap does not lessen its immediate environmental impact – it simply means that the soap will degrade over time. A flush of “biodegradable” soapsuds will still harm fish or invertebrates in your local stream.

Hold a meeting with car wash volunteers to explain the following methods for reducing environmental impact:

- Use a bucket of soapy water to re-soap rags or sponges throughout the wash rather than adding soap directly to rags or sponges.
- Wring sponges and washrags into buckets, not the ground.
- Conserve water by using a spray nozzle with an automatic shut off.
- Always empty buckets into the sanitary sewer system (e.g., sinks or toilets), NOT down the storm drain.
- Remember to clean up after the car wash fundraiser. Have a volunteer walk the perimeter of the site to pick up trash and debris and dispose of it properly.
- Remember to stop and think before you allow anything to go directly into the gutter or storm drain. Your “soapy suds” can reach a local stream feeding the Chesapeake Bay in as little as ten minutes.

For more information on best practices for stormwater management, please call the MDE Water Management Administration at (410) 537-3543.

MDE would like to acknowledge the Alameda Countywide Clean Water Program (California) for the information contained in this fact sheet on best management practices (BMPs) for car washes.



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