

Controlling Pet Waste in Suburban Areas

Where to look—and what to say to the public

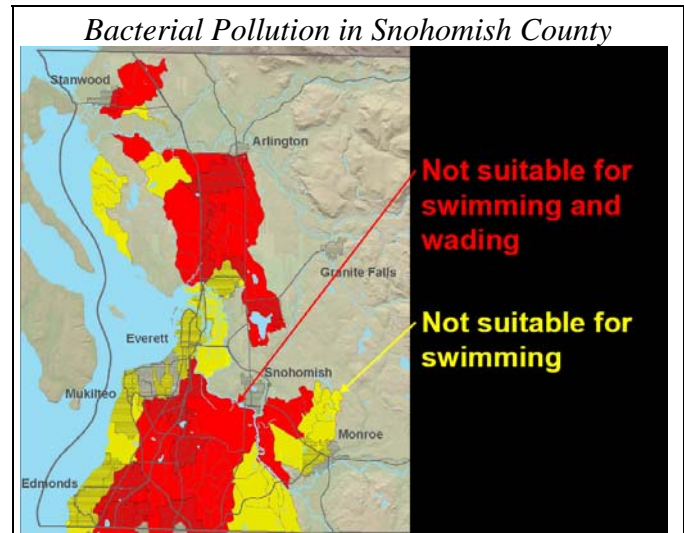
Introduction

People love their pets, and there are lots of them in Snohomish County. One by-product of pet ownership is pet waste, which is finding its way into urban and suburban streams. Solving this problem requires informed citizens who are motivated to change the way they manage their pet waste. Snohomish County took a scientific approach to this challenge and created a program to help local governments change public knowledge and behaviors, which helps keep pet waste out of local streams.

Problem

More than 126,000 dogs live in Snohomish County. These pets produce waste equivalent to a city of 40,000 people. In fact, over 20 tons of dog waste is dropped in Snohomish County *every day!* DNA studies in Snohomish County streams confirm that dog waste is present in local streams. Roundworms, *E. coli*, and *Giardia* are just a few of the many harmful microorganisms that can be transmitted from pet waste to humans. Some waste can last in a yard for as long as four years if not cleaned up. Children who play outside and adults who garden are at greatest risk of infection.

The county knew that its existing pet waste problem could grow even worse. The population rose nearly 25 percent over the past ten years, and strong population growth continues in Snohomish County today. Some homes are located along streams or natural drainages. Other properties are close to streets with storm sewer systems that connect directly to local streams and rivers. For these reasons, the county knew it was important to work with its citizens to solve this problem.



Pet waste in local stream?



Project Goals

Many organizations reach out to the public and businesses by creating and mailing out brochures. With so many products and services competing for people's attention, it is challenging to get out a new message to everyone with all the "information overload." The county also recognized that its message needed to be compelling enough to get people to change their current way of managing pet waste so that it stays out of local streams.

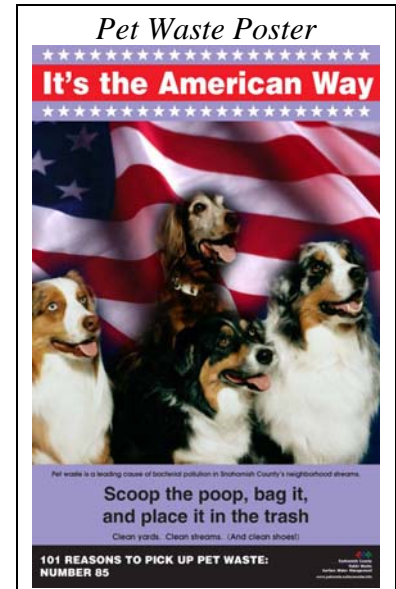
Knowing that they needed a better method, Snohomish County approached the Department of Ecology to help fund its project. They proposed to develop a well-researched pet waste management program that could also be used by other local governments across the state (and nation!). The county would study both businesses and citizens to get ideas and focus future activities on keeping local waters clean. They proposed to take a community-based marketing approach.

Milestones and Outcomes

To begin the pet waste program, the county team surveyed citizens on their pet waste management habits. With this information in hand, county staff developed and tested different outreach tools to make sure the message was clear and effective in changing the public's pet waste management habits.

The county also examined businesses involved with pet care. County staff visited dog kennels, pet shelters, and veterinary offices to learn about their pet waste management practices, interests, and challenges.

Some of the early results were surprising. Previous pet waste management campaigns focused on controlling waste in public areas such as dog parks and public trails. The county found that most pet waste was deposited on people's lawns. That new information allowed the county to develop its new program where most waste was being left unattended. County staff also realized that the public needed a clear message on the proper way to dispose of pet waste. Their message to the public: "Scoop the poop, bag it, and place it in the trash."



About 25 percent of all businesses visited had poor pet waste disposal problems; however, not all problems were affecting local streams. Education alone resulted in improvements at 75 percent of those facilities. The bottom line for businesses is that inspections and education can make a difference in operations quickly.

County staff soon discovered that veterinary offices are great places get the message out and help teach pet owners about the importance of managing pet waste. Their enthusiasm and professional expertise are important factors that will help local education campaigns to be as effective as possible.

Project highlights

Following the development of the new pet waste management program, Snohomish County held a workshop to share its findings with local governments from Washington State and Oregon. Over sixty participants learned the concepts of community-based marketing and how to implement the program. Pet waste management information for the general public can be found at www.petwaste.surfacewater.info. Research findings, downloadable posters and other materials for local governments can be found at www.h-petwaste.surfacewater.info.

Partners

Snohomish County, Surface Water Management Division
Department of Ecology, Water Quality Program

Funding

It cost \$200,000 over four years to perform the research and develop outreach tools and information for the project. Snohomish County provided 25 percent of the funding; Ecology provided the rest.

For more information

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