



Change labels on disposable wipes: Do Not Flush

Ease the expensive problems caused by disposable wipes for community wastewater systems.



What's the issue?

Disposable wipes — used for changing diapers, personal hygiene, housecleaning, and more — cause major problems when flushed down toilets. Because they don't break down the way toilet paper does, these wipes clog homeowner and municipal sewer pipes, put stress on community wastewater collection and treatment equipment, and cause cities to spend thousands on premature equipment repair and replacement. Wipes snag on any imperfection in sewer pipes, catch passing debris and grease, and create a "ball" that will grow to plug the pipe. Municipalities must manually clean screens or remove clogs.

What local officials are saying

In the 2015 Water Infrastructure Listening Sessions, many municipalities requested a flat-out ban on the sale of disposable wipes due to the big, costly problems they cause in municipal sewer pipes and wastewater facilities. Sauk Centre, Cold Spring, Princeton, and Wyoming are involved in a class-action lawsuit with several other Minnesota cities against companies that make "flushable" wipes. Recent articles in the *Brainerd Dispatch* ("Disposable, flushable wipes are wreaking havoc in Wadena sewers," 3/27/15), *Forest Lake Times* ("Princeton joins Wyoming in wipes lawsuit," 7/1/15), and *Star Tribune* ("Flushable' wipes can cost thousands to fix clogged pipes," 4/6/15) have reported on the problems for cities.

What we're proposing

This proposal would ban "flushable," "septic safe," or "sewer safe" labeling from nonwoven disposable products (wipes) sold in Minnesota. It would also require the packaging to include a "Do not flush" message.



Wipes raked from a grate in a lift station in Eagan.

How will it help

Changing the labeling on disposable wipes packaging would help change public behavior and over time reduce the amount of such wipes being flushed. Fewer wipes flushed would reduce operation and maintenance costs for municipalities across the state.

What wipes are costing Minnesota cities

MINNETONKA (pop. 48,370) — Starting in 2007, Tom Pletcher and his team with the City of Minnetonka's sanitary sewer system have had to clear wipes from pumps every three days. Pletcher, the city's water and sewer utilities field supervisor, says that wipes have been a major factor in all of Minnetonka's sewer backups in the past five years and have contributed to early equipment failures. Clearing backups costs the city \$1,000-\$1,500 for each clog, and Minnetonka has 8-10 backups every year. Once or twice a year, clogs cause sewage to back up into homes. This, Pletcher says, is the worst: "How do you put a cost on filling someone's basement with sewage?"



Clearing a wipes clog from a sewer-system pump in Minnetonka.

AVON (pop. 970) — Avon's utilities team checks pumps in the town's sewer system every day. When there is a wipes clog, they often have to use a crane to pull the pumps from 15 or 20 feet underground in order to clear them. In the past few years, the city has spent about \$73,000 to upgrade lift station pumps. Avon's utilities supervisor Jon Forsell says the older pumps were still functional, but not designed to handle wipes. In addition, the city spends almost \$4,000 a year on labor to clear wipes out of pumps.

LEWISTON (pop. 1,591) — Lewiston was spending about \$15,000 a year for a company to clear wipes clogs in its lift station pumps. Then the city bought a "Muffin Monster" — a machine that grinds up wipes before they get to pumps — for \$70,000. "We wouldn't have had to put it in if not for wipes," says public works director Curt Benter. The average monthly sewer charge in Lewiston is \$75.66.

ST. PETER (pop. 11,439) — The main station in St. Peter's collection system has pumps that can handle six-inch solids. But balls of wipes coming through the system have clogged the pumps over and over. In the past five years, the city has spent about \$100,000 on clearing clogs and repairing pumps after wipes gummed them up. The average monthly sewer charge for St. Peter residents is \$70.80.



A wipes clog protruding from the intake side of a submersible wastewater pump in the Redwood Falls wastewater treatment plant.



Wipes must be manually raked off a bar grate every day at a lift station in Eagan.



Wipes on the "trash rack" in the Rochester wastewater treatment plant. The trash rack is an early screening of material coming into the plant.



Wipes are labeled "flushable" but cause major problems for sewer systems when flushed.

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