Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA Environmental Column – July 2015
Hold on to your Butts!

Hold on to your cigarette butts, that is. Let's face it: many smokers litter when discarding their cigarette butts. They are dropped on sidewalks, tossed out the car window, and left on our beaches. A cigarette butt is so small, it is easy to feel like we're really not littering at all. What's a cigarette butt compared to tossing a bag of fast food wrappers into the street or pouring a can of used oil in the gutter?

One problem is the vast numbers of them that are not disposed of properly. Ask anyone who volunteers to do litter pick-up at parks, alongside roads, or on beaches, what the most common item picked up is during the clean-up. Along with beverage containers and food wrappers, cigarette butts are always at the top of the list. In 2009, the City of San Francisco reported that one quarter of the litter picked up on the City's streets was cigarette butts. According to National Geographic magazine (Brian Clark Howard, May 2015), cigarettes are the most common form of litter in our oceans around the world.

That cigarette butt you dropped on the sidewalk today could be carried into a creek, or the Russian River, tomorrow. A cigarette butt travels from the road to the gutter, down a storm drain and directly into our waterways.

We're used to hearing about the dangers to our own health when we smoke, but human health isn't the only thing harmed by cigarette smoking. Littered cigarette butts create a water quality hazard, and hazards to wildlife.

Cigarette butts are made of synthetic fibers (plastics) which can choke birds or other wildlife who eat them or block their digestive tracks. Cigarette butts also contain harmful chemicals. When soaked in water, such as a creek or river, they release toxins including nicotine, benzene, and heavy metals. A big enough concentration of cigarette butts in our waterways can cause a toxic soup that harms fish and other wildlife in our creeks and the Russian River.

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What to do? Hold on to your cigarette butts!

If you're not ready to quit smoking yet, then the next best thing is to hold on to your butts. Take responsibility for the cigarette butts you generate, because when disposed of improperly they *are* litter, they do harm wildlife, and they do pollute our waters. If you smoke while driving, put your cigarette butts out in your car's ashtray, rather than tossing them out the window. If you're out and about without an ashtray, stamp out the ember and carry the cigarette butt with you until you can place it in a trash receptacle. Consider carrying a small tin, such as an empty mint container, to carry them until you're able to drop them in a trashcan.

If you can, volunteer to do litter clean-up in your neighborhood, the Russian River, or our coastal beaches. And if you see someone littering a cigarette butt, let that person know cigarette smoking is harmful to more than their lungs: the butts they toss pollute our waters and harm wildlife.

This article was authored by Cristina Goulart for the Town of Windsor, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.

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