



Russian River Watershed Association

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

RRWA Environmental Column – August 2014 Save Our Creeks – Dispose of Yard Waste Properly

The Russian River Watershed Association through its member agencies strives to inform community members about our watershed. This series of articles serves as a tool to educate the community on ways to promote and maintain healthy watersheds.

Each of us can do our part to maintain clean and healthy waterways. If you live adjacent to a creek or waterway you may have additional responsibilities.

The focus of this article is to address the common misconception that it is okay to dispose of yard waste into creeks. Many people think the practice is okay because yard waste (consisting of lawn clippings, leaves, and branches) is natural material and is therefore harmless. For others, it is simply the easiest solution to dump yard waste where it doesn't belong. The bottom line is that yard waste is not beneficial and should never be placed in creeks. *Naturally occurring* woody debris and vegetation is beneficial for creeks and wildlife and should remain in creek corridors unless it creates a flood hazard.

Why is it important to keep yard waste out of creeks, waterways, and storm drains?

Yard waste that is intentionally thrown into the creek can smother and kill the existing vegetation that protects the creek bank. Over time, as vegetation on creek banks is lost, the creek bank may become more susceptible to erosion. Creek bank erosion may cause safety concerns for nearby property owners, and permitted repairs can be complex and costly. Tree branches that are thrown into creeks have the potential to cause blockages at bridges and culverts along the creek channel, increasing flood risk.

Yard waste that is deposited into creeks eventually decomposes and reduces the amount of dissolved oxygen in the creek. A creek with decreased levels of dissolved oxygen will have a difficult time of supporting aquatic life such as fish, amphibians and aquatic insects. Yard waste that contains fertilizer and/or pesticides should never be thrown in a creek since the chemicals can be extremely harmful to aquatic life supported by the creek.

Additionally, yard waste should never be stored or discarded on the street. Debris left on the street has the potential to enter the storm drain system which is connected directly to creeks and waterways. Yard debris on streets may also clog drainage grates and cause localized flooding requiring extra maintenance efforts.

What can you do to keep our creeks clean?

The first and most important step you can take is to never throw anything into a creek (unless it's a fishing line in season!). Yard waste should be containerized in your green yard waste bin and then placed on the street on your regular collection day. You can reduce the amount of yard waste by composting lawn clippings and leaves at home. An added benefit will be creating rich compost to use in your garden. An alternative to composting is to use a mulching mower and mulch the lawn clippings in place for a healthier lawn.



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Who maintains the creeks?

In most locations, property lines extend to the center line of the creek. When this is the case, the adjacent property owner shares responsibility for maintaining the creek bank. In some cases, the City, or respective governing agency, may have a maintenance easement along sections of the creek. When a maintenance easement is in place, then the respective agency bears the responsibility for maintaining the creek or waterway in accordance with the maintenance easement. Where creeks or waterways cross public streets and roads, the agency responsible for maintaining the street or road is also responsible for maintaining the area around the bridge and or culvert.

Remember, the ultimate responsibility for creeks starts with the adjacent land owner. Please do your part to keep our creeks clean so that we can all enjoy clean and healthy waterways.

This article was authored by Rick Seanor of the City of Ukiah 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.