

For Eye on the Environment, June 7, 2015

Used Oil & Filter Recycling: Avoid the daily spill

By David Goldstein, Ventura County Public Works Agency, IWMD

An oil spill from a pipeline in Santa Barbara has fouled beaches and harmed wildlife. Last weekend, I went swimming near the Ventura Pier and emerged from the water to the disturbing site of workers arriving in Tyvek suits and rubber gloves, combing the sand for tar balls. That is when I noticed the black sticky goo on the bottom of my foot.

Thanks to good luck and the skill of companies drilling off of our shores, as well as to strict regulations put in place since the 1969 Santa Barbara spill, oil on regional beaches is usually limited to natural seepage. Nevertheless, our environment still suffers every day from a slow motion oil spill. Our daily spill is slow because it occurs only a few quarts at a time, but it is constant, resulting from daily improper disposal of used motor oil and oil filters.

While oil companies battle spills with absorbent booms, skimmers, and armies of Tyvek-clad cleaners, public agencies battle the slow scourge of illegal oil dumping by distributing free drain kits, arranging for grant-funded advertising of oil recycling locations, staffing outreach booths at Earth Day events, and a variety of other methods.

Nevertheless, one major source of illegal oil dumping is seldom targeted. According to San Francisco State University's Public Research Institute, one category of culprits is responsible for over 50% of illegally dumped oil. The 2002 report, available on the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery website, says the primary villains are people who do not have an official oil changing business but change oil for others outside their own household. The report termed these people "shade tree mechanics" and noted they operate mainly in poor communities.

According to the report, titled "To the Greatest Extent Possible: Do-It-Yourselfers and the Recovery of Used Oil and Filters," few who illegally dump oil do so out of ignorance. Nearly everyone knows dumping oil on the ground or down a storm drain is not only bad for the environment and public health, it is also illegal and punishable by hefty fines, jail time, or both.

These dumpers want to avoid regulation, taxes, and any attention from authorities, so they pour used oil onto the ground, wash it into storm drains, or stuff it into garbage bound for landfills. You can report illegal dumping of oil by calling your local enforcement agency. The agency for most of Ventura County is the Ventura County Environmental Health Division, at 654-2813.

If you allow your car to be maintained by one of these "shade tree mechanics," be sure to ask for your oil back in containers, and bring it to a certified used oil collection center yourself.

If you know someone who changes oil for friends, neighbors, or informal customers, you can benefit the environment and conserve resources by asking how they handle used oil. If they give an unclear answer, keep your eye on the environment and follow up. You can deliver a crucial message to an audience public agencies struggle to influence.

If you change your own oil, are you careful to drain the final drops from each container? Do you save your used oil filter in a leak-proof bag and bring it to an oil recycling center along with your used oil?

Over 80 auto parts stores and automotive service centers in Ventura County accept oil free of charge from the public. In fact, State Certified Used Oil Collection Centers pay 40 cents per gallon if you request it.

If you do not keep an “eye on the environment” and step in a tar ball at the beach, I recommend cleaning your skin by rubbing it with peanut butter or baby oil.

On the net:

<http://www.ventura.org/rma/envhealth/complaint-form.html>

<http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/UsedOil/Reports/CenterSearch/Default.aspx?lang=en-US>

This column is provided weekly by David Goldstein, Environmental Resource Analyst with the County of Ventura. If you are a government agency or non-profit group that would like to submit an article on an environmental topic for this column, please contact David Goldstein at 805/658-4312 or david.goldstein@ventura.org