



THE Dirty Truth ABOUT FLUSHABLE WIPES

By Mark Clinton, Superintendent, Tellico Area Services System

Working in Customer Service has taught me more than I can fit into one article. One of the biggest concerns of customers is how much they end up having to spend out of their hard-earned money. Let's be honest, no one likes when they are hit with a price increase for a service they absolutely can't do without. Fresh, clean, water is one of our world's most important resources. Our water utility takes great pride in the actual cost of water to our customers being less than half a penny a gallon. While it is our mission to provide you with safe, clean drinking water at such a low rate, it is also our goal to manage our company in the most cost-efficient way.

Over the past several years, one of the biggest challenges our utility has faced is the never-ending cycle of repairing pump stations that are clogged with flushable wipes. Everyone uses some type of disposable wet wipes in some way each and every day – from baby wipes, personal hygiene wipes, cleaning wipes,

or disinfectant wipes. The convenience of having a small package of ready-to-use wipes that are premoistened and do not require any additional water or cleaning solution to use them has become a part of our everyday lives. One thing I'm sure we can all agree on is that convenience matters in this fast-paced world we live in. We rely on products and services that make our everyday tasks easier. We have put our trust into manufacturers, because why would they put a statement on an item if it weren't true? If the box or package promises that a flushable wipe is indeed flushable, why would you not believe it? They wouldn't dare put false information on packaging. While I'm not necessarily telling you to call out your favorite household brands for misleading information, I'm asking you to simply do just a little more research about what the packaging says before you believe it word for word. I'm also telling you that, as an employee of a water and wastewater utility company, flushable wipes aren't flushable.

You probably don't know that the majority of flushable wipes don't actually disintegrate. So, what actually happens to them? They are definitely true to their nature and hold up strong and keep form, even after you've flushed them and they are making their way to your wastewater facility. They are designed to be sturdy and are made from either natural fiber, such as cotton, or synthetic substances like polyester. Unlike toilet paper, which is designed to break down easily in the sewer system, they keep their structure when wet, which means they do not break down easily. You may think that that one single wipe that you are flushing will not cause any harm. While you may not see the actual effects, I assure you, it's there. Since the wipes aren't as biodegradable as they claim to be, they end up clogging the pump stations that utilities rely on to get your wastewater to the wastewater treatment plant. When the pump station is clogged, it is required to be manually cleared out, meaning the municipality

employees are in contact with raw sewage. Cleaning out the debris caught at the pump station may sound simple, but it can lead to several hours and hundreds of dollars to repair impellers or check valves. For those wipes that can make it through the pump stations, they are wreaking havoc on our wastewater treatment plants by stopping up drum screens or pumps.

Each year, flushable wipes have gained in popularity. We now see commercials and advertisements for all sorts of hygiene wipes and cleaning wipes. Companies are marketing their products well because, as consumers, we are flocking to the stores and emptying the shelves. This last year, these issues have gone from bad to worse. From toilet paper shortages to enhanced cleaning procedures everywhere, our utility is faced with clogged pump stations weekly. In densely populated areas, we are lucky if we can even make it an entire week before having to clear out wipes. While we sympathize with the difficulties of 2020, we are asking for your help. Please dispose of wipes in the trash!

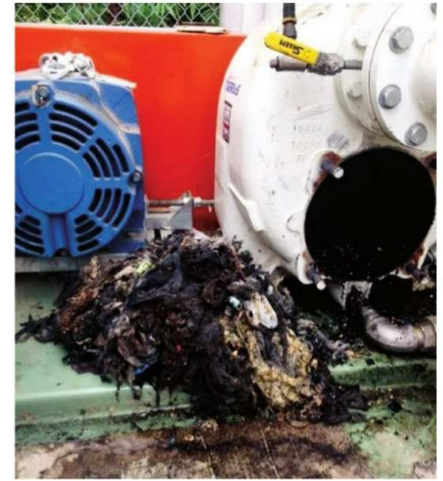
Some may even go as far as saying that this doesn't affect them directly, so why not continue to flush these like normal?

Each and every one of our customers connected to our sewer service have an E-one grinder pump or a Step-system. Both of which are costly to install. These grinder pumps, much like the pumps in our system, are not designed for wipes. While it may take a longer time to start experiencing malfunctions with these pumps, they can also become clogged, causing the sewage to back up into your home. At our utility, we do not service these pumps, which means homeowners will need to contact a plumber. Even those customers who aren't connected to sewer and have septic tanks should not flush these. While home repairs are always going to be a part of owning a home, if we can do our part to prevent something from happening, it's worth it.

A little over a month ago, we sent out this picture of one of our pump stations in Loudon County asking POAs to help us get the word out and took advantage of Facebook to make a post. Since then, we've had more than 8,800 people see our post. If you come to our office, you will find this attached to our doors, our drive-through windows, and displayed in our lobby for everyone to see. If you sign

up for service with us, we include this information in our new customer packets.

Our water utility isn't recommending to discontinue use of these products. We are simply asking for your help to keep wipes out of the pipes!



REFERENCES:

www.iwsfg.org

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engineering | architecture | geospatial

www.grwinc.com

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