

'Flushable' wipes a problem for Tahoe sewers

By Kurt Althof

Although the sewer systems around Lake Tahoe are all carefully engineered and designed to export waste from the Tahoe basin, the complex process can be dramatically affected when certain materials are flushed down the toilet.

These materials include so-called "flushable wipes," paper towels, cotton swabs, feminine hygiene products, condoms, facial tissues (Kleenex), dental floss, or anything other than toilet paper and human waste.

In fact, toilet paper is the only "product" that is designed to break down quickly and pass harmlessly through the sewer system. The sewer system is not designed to be a garbage disposal. The consequences of using it that way are sometimes harmful, particularly in such an environmentally sensitive area as Lake Tahoe.

There is nothing pleasant about a sewer backup, but a sewer backup in your home is not only stomach

churning, it can also be costly and a significant health concern. If that sewer backup makes its way into Lake Tahoe, or any part of the environment, it creates significant challenges and harm.

Most of the time a sewer "spill" is preventable and caused by the misuse of the sewer system.



Wipes clog sewer systems, even ones that say “flushable” on the container. Photo/TCPUD

The sewer system’s No. 1 enemy is the misnamed “flushable wipe.” Many wipe products are marketed as “flushable,” and although they do go down the toilet, they cause tens of thousands of dollars in damage and numerous sewer back-ups each year. To make matters worse, the concept of flushable wipes has established a perception that wipes in general are flushable and subtly encourages customers to flush any and all wipes.

Although makers of these so called “flushable wipes” contend their products break down appropriately in the sewer system, test after test proves this is not the case.

When you or your neighbors flush non-flushable items, the risk of a sewer backup increases significantly, not only in the lateral that connects your house to the main, but in the main system and in sewer pumps. Regular routine maintenance and inspections of sewer mains are performed throughout the

region, but this cannot catch every problem before it causes a backup and damages homes, businesses, and the environment.

The best approach is to keep it simple: nothing but human waste and toilet paper should go down the toilet. Flushing anything else will damage your household plumbing, the environment, and the wastewater system.

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