Urban Runoff

What is urban runoff?
Urban runoff is the term for water that flows over man-made surfaces in densely populated areas and drains into nearby waterbodies. Runoff can come from many sources like rain, snowmelt, overwatering a lawn, washing a car in the driveway, or leaks. When this water falls on natural surfaces, it tends to move more slowly and soak into the ground. When water falls on man-made surfaces like asphalt, it cannot soak in and instead runs across the surface and picks up any pollutants in its path. This mix of water and everything it has picked up — now called urban runoff — carries pollutants into rivers, creeks, lakes, or storm drains that drain into the ocean.

Urban runoff represents the biggest pollution threat to the health of San Diego’s waters. Some of the most common pollutants in runoff include lawn fertilizers, industrial metals, trash, sediment, and pet waste. Each of these pollutants degrades the environment and puts the health of San Diego’s people and wildlife at risk. Pollutants contained in runoff can cause infections in humans, threaten environmental health by lowering water quality, can cause toxins to build up in fish, lead to toxic algae blooms, and degrade important wildlife habitat.

Solutions to pollution
Tackling urban runoff takes collaboration. Rather than starting at a single source, runoff comes from the countless everyday activities of all of us. San Diego’s large area and dense population make fighting runoff complex, but once pollution is in our water, it’s even harder to clean up. That’s why it’s better to prevent pollution in the first place.
While tackling pollution in runoff might seem like a big challenge, San Diego Coastkeeper is committed to reducing its impact. Coastkeeper fights for increased water quality protections and advocating for practices that keep pollution from getting into our waters. You can do your part by preventing urban runoff in your community. Check out the ideas below to learn how you can help. Together, we can keep San Diego’s water clean for all to enjoy.

**HOW CAN I HELP?**

Here are some ways you can prevent pollution in your community:

- Always, always clean up after your dog
- Take your car to a car wash, where water is filtered and reused, instead of washing it in the driveway
- Ensure your car isn’t leaking oil onto the driveway, parking lot, or street
- Avoid over-watering the lawn and fix leaky sprinklers
- Use pesticides and fertilizers sparingly, or plant native plants instead
- Capture rainwater at home to feed your plants
- Create less waste by switching to reusable items
- Pick up litter at one of our beach cleanups

**References**

Photos: Shannon Switzer, San Diego Coastkeeper
San Diego Coastkeeper (2018, October 2). Beyond the beach cleanup: how conserving at home protects the ocean [blog post]. [https://www.sdcoastkeeper.org/blog/uncategorized/beyond-the-beach-clean-up-how-conserving-at-home-protects-the-ocean](https://www.sdcoastkeeper.org/blog/uncategorized/beyond-the-beach-clean-up-how-conserving-at-home-protects-the-ocean)