

# Ask Your Environmental Commissioner: Why Scoop the Pet Poop?

By Jody Sackett, Rumson Environmental Commissioner

While dog owners adore their dogs, frankly none of them like to pick up dog poop. While this can't come as a surprise, it is a responsibility that needs to be done to protect the precious waterways surrounding our beautiful peninsula. If left behind, stormwater runoff will wash dog feces into our local rivers and the ocean, causing degraded water quality. The result is health risks to humans and fish, increased algae and weed growth from nutrient pollution, and unsafe drinking, fishing, and swimming water.

Doggie waste is a significant source of bacteria, viruses, and parasites, which can leach into groundwater or be washed into local storm drains and waterways by the rain. An average dog poop contains 3 billion fecal coliform bacteria. Diseases such as campylobacteriosis, salmonellosis, and toxocarisis, which are harmful to humans, can be spread. Many parasites require days or weeks to reach the infective stage, so the waste becomes more hazardous to your health the longer it sits. Roundworms can remain alive in the soil for years. And dog waste attracts rats, who feed on the feces.

Poop also contains organic matter and nutrients, including excess phosphorous and nitrogen. When this is washed into the waterways by rain or lawn sprinklers, the organic matter decays and uses up aquatic oxygen as well as releases ammonia. A lack of oxygen and increased ammonia levels are leading causes of fish kills.

While one poop seems like a miniscule impact, consider that there are an estimated *5 million dogs* in NJ. The average dog produces about  $\frac{3}{4}$  pound of feces each day (okay, maybe we're not looking at you, Teacup Yorkies). Multiply daily dog waste production by five million dogs, and it's a *lot* of waste washing into our state's waterways. Plus, it takes about two months for dog feces to decompose, which is a long time for it to be hanging around causing a ruckus. Thus, not picking up dog waste cumulatively creates a huge problem. Luckily, it's a source of pollution that be easily managed with just a bit of effort, and there are simple solutions.

**Bag It.** Simply picking up the poop in a plastic or biodegradable bag is the easiest. While you can purchase such bags, you can also just reuse your old plastic grocery store produce bags or newspaper delivery bags, accomplishing two environmental goals in one fell swoop. Just toss the whole caboodle into the trash when the waste is picked up. Often public parks offer not only dog baggies but also trash can receptacles too.

**Flush It.** This is probably the best environmental option if you can handle it, and you're connected to the local sewage treatment system instead of a septic system. The waste will be properly treated and disposed of through the sewer system, instead of being added to a landfill. You can pick up the poop with a plastic baggie and simply empty the contents right into your toilet bowl and flush. Don't flush the bag too, or you'll have clogged pipes; dispose of the bag in the trash. Some folks just use a trowel or fancy Pooper-Scooper instead of a plastic bag to pick up backyard dog waste and flush it away, saving the bag for another time.

**Digest It.** Don't just throw the poop in your composter, as it contains pathogens. There are dog waste digesters and composting systems designed just to deal with the poop. However, since

there's a risk of potential pathogens, before you purchase a digester, make sure you can install the system far away from well water and gardens.

**Hire a Poop Pick-up Service.** When all else fails, call someone else to come and pick up the waste. There are several local dog waste management services you can hire to come on a regular basis. Use these services and protect our waterways.