

Time to get on the road to clean water

Gail Prunty

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The Dirt on Conservation

“Come on, baby!” I encouraged her. “Just a walk, or rather, ride in the park.” One push of the button and my 17-year-old car’s engine started up strong. While this was not an uncommon task, doing so in sub-zero weather was an uncommon ask.

Has it been days, weeks or perhaps even months that we’ve been hun-
gering down throughout this winter’s
deep freeze? Yet, despite the plunge of
our thermometers, the daily demands
of getting to and fro continues and
come hail or ice water, onward we
must go — to work, to school, to life’s
commitments. For most of us and for
most of the year, we take for granted
the reliability, convenience and free-
dom that our automobiles provide.
Rarely do we think twice about getting
where we need to go or the conse-
quences of doing so.

In 1940, only 60% of Americans
owned cars. Today, approximately
92% of Americans do, and the major-
ity of households have more than one
vehicle. Along with this increase came
our movement from cities to suburbs,
and more and more roads. Though
convenient for travel, our enormous
national network of roads, highways
and bridges also contributes to major
water pollution issues. Transportation
infrastructure now accounts for up
to 75% of all impervious surfaces in
towns and cities.

The melting snow (including our
recent snowmageddon!) and rain-
water that was once able to soak into
soil now hits the pavement, runs over
roads, bridges, driveways and parking
lots, then into storm drains and ditches
that drain directly into our nearby
streams and rivers. Along the way, this
water picks up and carries pollutants
from vehicles, road construction and
maintenance activities. These con-
taminants include dirt and dust, rub-
ber and metal deposits from tire wear,

salt, dripping engine oil and antifreeze,
sediment, cigarette butts, plastic bot-
tles, plastic bags and loads and loads
of litter.

How can we protect the quality of
freshwater draining from the land and
discharging into our nearby rivers and
streams? Throughout 2026, Geauga
Soil and Water Conservation District
is reminding residents of simple mea-
sures to help steer clear of stormwater
pollution and enjoy the benefits that
come with being “On the Road to
Clean Water!”

Shake the winter salt habit

Just like too much salt in your
diet can be bad for your health, too
much salt on our roads can be harm-
ful to our waterways. Though criti-
cal to our safety, road salt (sodium
and chloride) is the most common-
ly-used deicer, and unfortunately,
loads of it gets carried by melting ice
and snow into local lakes, streams
and groundwater.

To put it in perspective, chloride
from just one teaspoon of road salt
can permanently pollute 5 gallons of
water, making our waterways saltier
over time. And though we think of
it as a winter problem, aquatic life
seems to be more sensitive to salt in
warmer weather.

Simple changes to our salting tac-
tics can greatly improve the health of
our watersheds without jeopardizing
our safety. Shovel and clear snow
from your driveway and sidewalks
before it turns to ice. If salting, re-
member to spread sparingly with
about 3 inches between grains. So-
dium chloride only works above 15
F, and a 12-ounce coffee mug full of
salt is enough to de-ice 10 sidewalk
squares or two parking spaces. Also,
be sure to sweep up and reuse the ex-
cess once the salt has done its job to
save money and reduce runoff.

Fix that leak

Your car contains fluids that allow
it to function properly, but when these
fluids leak, much bigger problems can
occur — to your wallet and our water.
Fixing a small leak now may prevent

big car repairs down the road.

Once a leak is discovered, identi-
fy the fluid and get the leak fixed as
soon as possible. If you are not sure
what is leaking, cardboard can be
placed under your parked car’s warm
engine to catch and help identify the
dripping fluid. If unaddressed, these
fluids can be extremely toxic and cre-
ate dangerous puddles that threaten
kids and pets.

Years ago, I painfully witnessed
firsthand the toxicity of vehicle
fluids through the slow death of
my golden retriever — even after
immediate medical attention and
treatment. Unaware of the toxicity,
my neighbor had dumped used anti-
freeze into the snow earlier that day.
Both of our dogs were attracted to its
sweet smell and taste, and both dogs
tragically died. Fixing vehicle leaks at
the start prevents bigger problems,
potential hazards and toxic pollution
down the road.

Clean ride, clean water

Any vehicle that calls the snow-
belt home spends its entire winter
being “a-salt-ed” and more often
than not carries battle wounds
from our roadway’s salt and brine.
To recover the luster and prevent
corrosion, washing our cars strate-
gically around the freeze and thaws
becomes an unwelcome winter pas-
time.

For the rest of the year, our car
washing options are plentiful, and
it’s not when, but rather, where
you wash your wheels that matters
most! Using a commercial carwash
is a great option for water quality
because the water used gets safely
treated through sanitary sewers.

If you wash your car at home in
the driveway, all of the soap — along
with the dirt, grime, grease and oil —
rinses off the car, flows into a nearby
ditch or storm drain and then direct-
ly into our rivers and lakes. Avoid
pavement unless it drains to a vege-
tated area and not into a storm drain.

Washing it on your lawn or a
gravel drive is better because it al-
lows water to be absorbed and fil-



Salt from our roadways is now a pollutant to our waterways. It’s helpful to shovel and clear snow from your driveway and sidewalks before it turns to ice and if salting, spread sparingly. A 12-ounce coffee mug full of salt is enough to deice 10 sidewalk squares or 2 parking spaces. (Gauga SWCD photo)

tered through the soil. Also, be sure
to use biodegradable, phosphate-free
and water-based cleaners, along with
a hose nozzle adaptor to limit water
usage.

No matter the season or where
life takes us, we can determine how
our miles and miles of roadways af-
fect the health of our waterways.
From winter salting to vehicle main-
tenance, now is the time to “brake”
the old habits and navigate through
new methods that keep us on the
road to clean water!

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