

## Fifi and Fido Say: "Pick It Up!"

by Gary R. Peacock, Watershed Specialist, York County Conservation District

For as long as Fifi and Fido have been our best friends, dog poop has posed a menace to our noses and feet. Now science has revealed a more unsavory truth: It's an environmental pollutant. In the mid-1990s, scientists perfected methods for tracking the origin of nasty bacteria in streams and seawater. From Clearwater, FL, to Arlington, VA, to Boise, ID, the trail has led straight to Fifi and Fido – and to owners who don't pick up after their pets. At some beaches, dogs help raise bacteria levels so high that visitors must stay out of the water. Goaded by such studies, some cities have directed as much as \$10,000 in the last few years to encourage dog owners to clean up after their pets. A few municipalities have started issuing citations to those who ignore pet cleanup ordinances.



Many dog lovers are in denial about their pooches' leavings. But researchers have named the idea that areas used by dogs pump more bacteria into waterways – the "Fido hypothesis." Dogs are only one of many fixtures of suburban America that add to water pollution. Lawn fertilizers, rinse water from driveways and motor oil commonly end up in streams and lakes. But unlike those sources, dogs generate disease-causing bacteria that can make people sick. Studies done in the last few years put dogs third or fourth on the list of contributors to bacteria in contaminated waters.

It doesn't take a Ph.D. to figure out that dog doo is nasty. But it took science to determine how nasty it is. From mutt to blue-blooded champion, all dogs harbor so-called coliform bacteria, which live in the gut. The group includes *E. coli*, a bacterium that can cause disease, and fecal coliform bacteria, which spread through feces. Dogs also carry salmonella and giardia.

Environmental officials use measurements of some of these bacteria as barometers of how much fecal matter has contaminated a body of water. This wouldn't matter if pet dogs were few. But four in 10 U.S. households include at least one dog, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. The Association's statistics show that 54.4 million American households own 77.8 million dogs in 2015. Of that total, 45% were "large" dogs - 40 pounds or more. Those numbers add up to a lot of kibble. That wouldn't matter if all dog owners also owned a pooper-scooper. But several studies have found that roughly 40% of Americans don't pick up their dogs' feces (women are more likely to do so than men).

### Chesapeake Bay (Swann, 1999)

- 🐾 Dog ownership 41%
- 🐾 44% of dog owners do not walk dogs
- 🐾 Dog walkers who clean up most/all of the time 59%
- 🐾 Dog walkers who never or rarely clean up 41%
- 🐾 Of those who never or rarely clean up, 44% would not clean up even with fine, complaints, or improved sanitary collection or disposal methods
- 🐾 63% agreed that pet wastes contribute to water quality problems



## Dog Owners' Rationale for Picking Up or Not Picking Up after Their Dog (HGIC, 1996)

### Reasons for not picking it up:

- 🐾 Because it eventually goes away
- 🐾 Just because
- 🐾 Too much work
- 🐾 On edge of my property
- 🐾 It's in my yard
- 🐾 It's in the woods
- 🐾 Not prepared
- 🐾 No reason
- 🐾 Small dog, small waste
- 🐾 Use as fertilizer
- 🐾 Sanitary reason
- 🐾 Own a cat or other kind of pet

### Reasons for picking it up:

- 🐾 It's the law
- 🐾 Environmental reasons
- 🐾 Hygiene/health reasons
- 🐾 Neighborhood courtesy
- 🐾 It should be done
- 🐾 Keep the yard clean

The reluctance of many residents to handle dog waste is the biggest limitation to controlling pet waste. According to a Chesapeake Bay survey, 44% of dog walkers who do not pick up indicated they would still refuse to pick up, even if confronted by complaints from neighbors, threatened with fines, or provided with more sanitary and convenient options for retrieving and disposing of dog waste. Above are some of the factors that compel residents to pick up after their dog, along with some interesting rationalizations for not doing so.

Even where dogs aren't the prime offenders, they're one of the few polluters authorities have control over. Officials know that they have a lot of educating to do before people realize their pooch can be a canine sewage pipe. Some people find it humiliating to carry a plastic bag.

🐾 Programs to control pet waste typically use "pooper-scooper" ordinances to regulate pet waste cleanup. These ordinances require the removal and proper disposal of pet waste from public areas and other peoples' property before the dog owner leaves the immediate area. Often a fine is associated with failure to perform this act as a way to encourage compliance. Some ordinances also include a requirement that pet owners remove pet waste from their own property within a prescribed time frame.

🐾 Public education programs are another way to encourage pet waste removal. Often pet waste messages are incorporated into a larger non-point

source message relaying the effects of pollution on local water quality. Brochures and public service announcements describe proper pet waste disposal techniques and try to create a storm drain-water quality link between pet waste and runoff.

- 🐾 Signs in public parks and the provision of receptacles for pet waste also encourage cleanup.
- 🐾 Another option for pet waste management is the use of specially designated dog parks where pets are allowed off-leash. These parks typically include signs reminding pet owners to remove waste, as well as other disposal options for pet owners.
- 🐾 The design of these dog parks should be done to mitigate stormwater impacts. The use of vegetated buffers, pooper-scooper stations, and the siting of parks out of drainage-ways, streams and steep slopes will help control the impacts of dog waste on receiving waters.

