

Pollutant Impacts on Water Quality

Sediment	Sediment is a common component of storm water, and can be a pollutant. Sediment can be detrimental to aquatic life (primary producers, benthic invertebrates, and fish) by interfering with photosynthesis, respiration, growth, reproduction, and oxygen exchange in water bodies. Sediment can transport other pollutants that are attached to it including nutrients, trace metals, and hydrocarbons. Sediment is the primary component of total suspended solids (TSS), a common water quality analytical parameter.
Nutrients	Nutrients including nitrogen and phosphorous are the major plant nutrients used for fertilizing landscapes, and are often found in storm water. These nutrients can result in excessive or accelerated growth of vegetation, such as algae, resulting in impaired use of water in lakes and other sources of water supply. For example, nutrients have led to a loss of water clarity in Lake Tahoe. In addition, un-ionized ammonia (one of the nitrogen forms) can be toxic to fish.
Bacteria and viruses	Bacteria and viruses are common contaminants of storm water. For separate storm drain systems, sources of these contaminants include animal excrement and sanitary sewer overflow. High levels of indicator bacteria in storm water have led to the closure of beaches, lakes, and rivers to contact recreation such as swimming.
Oil and Grease	Oil and grease includes a wide array of hydrocarbon compounds, some of which are toxic to aquatic organisms at low concentrations. Sources of oil and grease include leakage, spills, cleaning and sloughing associated with vehicle and equipment engines and suspensions, leaking and breaks in hydraulic systems, restaurants, and waste oil disposal.
Metals	Metals including lead, zinc, cadmium, copper, chromium, and nickel are commonly found in storm water. Many of the artificial surfaces of the urban environment (e.g., galvanized metal, paint, automobiles, or preserved wood) contain metals, which enter storm water as the surfaces corrode, flake, dissolve, decay, or leach. Over half the trace metal load carried in storm water is associated with sediments. Metals are of concern because they are toxic to aquatic organisms, can bioaccumulate (accumulate to toxic levels in aquatic animals such as fish), and have the potential to contaminate drinking water supplies.
Organics	Organics may be found in storm water in low concentrations. Often synthetic organic compounds (adhesives, cleaners, sealants, solvents, etc.) are widely applied and may be improperly stored and disposed. In addition, deliberate dumping of these chemicals into storm drains and inlets causes environmental harm to waterways.
Pesticides	Pesticides (including herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides, and insecticides) have been repeatedly detected in storm water at toxic levels, even when pesticides have been applied in accordance with label instructions. As pesticide use has increased, so too have concerns about adverse effects of pesticides on the environment and human health. Accumulation of these compounds in simple aquatic organisms, such as plankton, provides an avenue for biomagnification through the food web, potentially resulting in elevated levels of toxins in organisms that feed on them, such as fish and birds.
Gross Pollutants	Gross Pollutants (trash, debris, and floatables) may include heavy metals, pesticides, and bacteria in storm water. Typically resulting from an urban environment, industrial sites and construction sites, trash and floatables may create an aesthetic "eye sore" in waterways. Gross pollutants also include plant debris (such as leaves and lawn-clippings from landscape maintenance), animal excrement, street litter, and other organic matter. Such substances may harbor bacteria, viruses, vectors, and depress the dissolved oxygen levels in streams, lakes, and estuaries sometimes causing fish kills.
Vector Production	Vector production (e.g., mosquitoes, flies, and rodents) is frequently associated with sheltered habitats and standing water. Unless designed and maintained properly, standing water may occur in treatment control BMPs for 72 hours or more, thus providing a source for vector habitat and reproduction (Metzger, 2002).