

Flushable' wipes clog, damage aging sewer systems utilities say

'Flushable' personal products clog, damage aging sewer systems, utilities say

By Katherine Shaver

Washington Post

on September 8, 2013 - 8:03 PM

, updated September 8, 2013 at 8:07 PM

WASHINGTON – Next time you go to toss that “flushable” wipe in the toilet, you might want to consider a request from your sewer utility: Don’t.

Sewer agencies across the country say the rapidly growing use of pre-moistened “personal” wipes – used most often by potty-training toddlers and people seeking what’s advertised as a more “thorough” cleaning than toilet paper – are clogging pipes and jamming pumps.

Utilities struggling with aging infrastructure have wrestled for years with the problem of “ragging” – when baby wipes, dental floss, paper towels and other items not designed for flushing entangle sewer pumps.

The latest menace, officials say, is that wipes and other products, including pop-off scrubbers on toilet-cleaning wands, are increasingly being marketed as “flushable.” Even ever-thickening, super-soft toilet paper is worrisome because it takes longer to disintegrate, some say.

“Just because you can flush it doesn’t mean you should,” said I.J. Hudson, a spokesman for the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, which handles sewage for 1.8 million Maryland residents in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties.

The result: Utility officials say crews needed for less preventable sewer maintenance and repairs are being deployed instead to wipes patrol.

The WSSC has spent more than \$1 million to install heavy-duty grinders to shred wipes and other debris before they reach pumps on the way to the treatment plant, Hudson said.

Officials with the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority say that more than 500 man-hours have been devoted over the past 12 months to removing stuck wipes and repairing broken equipment.

In Anne Arundel County, Md., officials blame wipes on a 35 percent jump in broken pumps and clogged sewer lines over the past several years.

The wipes also contribute to blockages that cause sewage to overflow into streams and back up into basements.

This summer, a 15-ton glob of wipes and hardened cooking grease the size of a bus – and nicknamed “Fatberg” by the Brits – was discovered in a London sewer pipe after residents complained of toilets that would not flush.

What constitutes “flushable” might soon get federal oversight.

Officials of the wastewater industry and wipe manufacturers say the Federal Trade Commission recently asked for data as part of an investigation into the “flushable” label.

A spokeswoman said the FTC does not confirm ongoing inquiries unless it takes action.

Wipe manufacturers say they are trying to reduce wear and tear on sewer systems and septic tanks. A trade group, the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, is forming a technical work group with utility officials to sort through differences over how wipes should be tested for flushability and how quickly they should be required to break apart.

The two sides have worked on the issue since at least 2007 but stepped up discussions this summer after the trade association released an updated “Code of Practice” for wipes manufacturers.

The guidelines, which are voluntary, spell out seven tests that a product should pass before being marketed as “flushable.”

They also suggest making “Do Not Flush” logos – an encircled person and toilet with a slash – more prominent on those that do not pass but are commonly used in bathrooms.

Dave Rousse, president of the fabrics group, said the primary problem lies with people flushing paper towels, baby wipes and other products not advertised – or designed – for toilets.