

Why Care About Dog Waste?

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Audience: Athens dog owners

Action/perspective: Proper disposal of dog waste

Fecal Coliform. Doesn't sound good, does it? Maybe that's because it isn't. Fecal coliform is a term that describes some types of bacteria that live in the intestines of animals. When the intestines are emptied out - when the animals poop - this bacteria is released into the environment. Different kinds of fecal coliform bacteria can be very hazardous to human health. They've been known to cause such diseases as gastroenteritis, ear infections, typhoid, dysentery, hepatitis A, and cholera ([Clemson University, 2015](#)). So we've established that fecal coliform = no bueno.

Now guess what one of the major fresh water pollutants of Athens streams and rivers is. That's right - fecal coliform. So does that mean poop bacteria is floating around in places like Lake Herrick, Lily Branch, and the Oconee River? Yes, that is exactly what it means. How does it get from your backyard dog pile to the area's streams and rivers? The simple answer is runoff. When it rains in Athens, water runs off of the city's concrete and asphalt - some examples of impervious surfaces - and doesn't get a chance to soak into the ground where plants and soils can filter the bacteria out. Let's take a moment to think about only the downtown area of Athens. How much of this area consists of streets, rooftops, parking lots, and sidewalks? All of that area is considered "impervious surface area" and it absolutely dwarfs the amount of lawn and green space in the city.

Water that runs off of impervious surfaces collects motor oil, grease, chemical fertilizers, and fecal coliform on its way downhill. While much of it is captured by storm drains and gutters, many of our city's drains empty this polluted water straight into waterways, which means the water doesn't go through any treatment facilities the way our sewage does. Even if the drains *did* lead to water treatment plants, they can only collect a portion of runoff. Although vegetated land areas do capture some runoff, our beautiful red Georgia clay soils can't soak up much water. This is part of the reason some low-lying portions of Athens flood quickly when there's a storm.

Just to recap: Fecal coliform is present in dog waste. Dog waste in the city gets washed into drains, gutters, and downhill when it rains. This rainwater then flows into Athens' major bodies of water, like the Oconee, Lily Branch, and Tanyard Creek. Of course, if you spend time at Lake Harrick, or go inner tubing down the Oconee in the summer, you're being exposed to all of these pollutants, including fecal coliform. That fact is unsettling enough, but how would you like to drink fecal coliform? Ever wonder where the water in your faucets comes from? We in Athens get the water we drink, cook with, and bathe in from three sources; Bear Creek Reservoir, the North Oconee River, and the Middle Oconee River ([Athens-Clarke County website](#)).

Since we've established that pet waste has harmful bacteria that get into our drinking and recreational sources of water, being concerned, responsible citizens, we want to know what to do about it. It's true that changing some of the infrastructure of the city would help. However, it would be a long and costly process to replace all of the impervious surfaces in Athens with permeable surface area. Similarly, the time and expense of creating a collection system for all of the city's runoff would be prohibitive to say the least. The solution to the problem lies at the source - our pet's waste.

Isn't dog poop natural? Doesn't it fertilize plants? Surely, one dog doesn't make that much difference. First, let's think about what we feed our dogs. Most of us can't afford to feed our pets steak and pork chops. Commercial dog foods contain a number of things a dog wouldn't naturally eat if it were one of its wild relatives: things like ash, corn meal, and dyes. So while our dogs are nature's creatures, they've lead domestic lives for thousands of years and most eat commercially prepared diets. As far as the plant-nourishing properties of dog feces goes, one needs but to take a look outside at the brown patches of grass in a dog's yard to get the answer to that question.

Many of our parks in Athens and portions of the University of Georgia's campus feature dog cleanup stations, which offer waste bags that owners can use to pick up dog waste and trash bins for convenient disposal. Even if our nearest park doesn't include these stations, it's easy to take along our own bags. They're available at most stores that supply pet food, and come packaged in compact dispensers. Our dogs can even carry their own waste bags, attached to their leashes or collars. At home, in the yard, we can make sure that animal waste can easily be picked up with the use of simple "pooper scoopers" or by hiring a service. Alternatively, local students might not mind doing the task for a few extra bucks.

When we consider not only the health hazards posed by fecal coliform, but also take into account the aesthetic factors (i.e. not smelling or stepping in dog poop), picking up after our pets is just the socially responsible thing to do, and the healthiest option for our neighborhood water. So don't let fecal coliform get you down, pick up the poop!