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Pump stations' clogs blamed on 'flushable' wipes

Portland Water District officials say they may need to build a \$4.5 million screening facility.

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Flush it and forget it.

That's the advertising message to parents buying the latest toilet wipes for kids, packaged with pastel colors, puppies and smiling cartoon frogs.

The message is different from wastewater treatment technicians, who are removing more and more clogs at neighborhood pump stations, sometimes in the middle of the night.

"Don't do it," says Howard Carter at the Saco wastewater treatment plant. "The general public, they just think about flushing it down, and then it's gone. Typically, those things don't break down like they say they are going to."

The Portland Water District, which provides water and wastewater treatment services for most towns in Greater Portland, wants to get the word to the public: Please stop flushing disposable wipes, no matter what the packaging says, and stick to toilet paper.

"Disposable wipes, even flushable wipes, should not go down the drain," said Tom Hume, wastewater systems operator for the Portland Water District.

If the clogging persists, water district officials say they may need to build a \$4.5 million screening facility, which could result in higher water rates.

"Most often they end up clogging pumping stations," Hume said. "If they do make it to the wastewater plant, they could cause more damage and ultimately have to be removed at a greater expense."

It's a recent phenomenon, as the consumer wipes industry has exploded over the past few years. Now there are disposable wipes for everything from cleaning baby poop to removing fingernail polish. Sixty percent of adults use household cleaning wipes, according to MarketResearch.com.

Michelle Clements, spokeswoman for the Portland Water District, bought several products recently for research and an informal experiment.

"It's very confusing," she said. "Some say they are flushable. Some say do not flush. Some don't say anything at all."

Adding to the problem is the lack of definition for "flushable." That could simply mean the wipe will pass through a conventional toilet and into a wastewater collection system. But what happens then?

Clements has submerged several wipe products in water for

most of the past week.

"Obviously it doesn't exactly replicate a wastewater environment, but they are still firmly intact," she said.

Kimberly-Clark, a multinational company based in Texas, manufactures the Cottonelle brand of flushable wipes. According to the product Web site, the flushability is based on the size of the product, and the quantity used.

"We have conducted testing to be certain the wipes move through plumbing systems. Results of this testing indicate that our product can be used in a plumbing system in good working order. For best flushability, we recommend that consumers use one to two wipes per flush," the company says on its Web site.

Joey Mooring, a spokesman for Kimberly-Clark, said the company stands by its testing, and consumers can continue to flush certain products. He said the company will continue to improve the wipes so they degrade faster.

"We strongly support efforts on keeping sewers clear of materials that should not be flushed," and are labeled as such, Mooring said.

Carter, of the Saco Public Works Department, said the volume of wipes entering the system is clogging the works for pumps.

"They probably do break down eventually, but a lot of times, they may only be in there for a couple of hours before they reach the pump stations," Carter said.

He said wipes have been a major problem for the Saco pump station that sends wastewater from the Hillview subdivision to the treatment plant. Workers had to clean the pump out at least a few times a week last year, he said.

The wastewater technicians have other responsibilities, Carter said, and the town was paying overtime for the maintenance. The pipes in homes can back up when a pump station isn't working, so the town can't just wait until morning to deal with problems.

Saco bought new equipment with a different design, which has helped but not completely solved the problem.

A similar problem occurred at a Gorham pump station that handles the wastewater for one road, Clements said.

"It was clogging. We did education just to that road. We knocked on doors," she said. "We had to actually buy screening equipment. Whoever was doing it never stopped."

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