DISPOSAL OF PAINT WASTES

This Guidance examines the effects of improper paint waste disposal on the environment, and recommends ways of disposing of paint wastes in a legal and environmentally friendly way.

BACKGROUND

The Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts sometimes receives reports of unwanted paint and paint-contaminated water being poured into the sewer or stormwater system by people painting and decorating.

The painters may be unaware of the effect this is having on the natural aquatic system. They may also be unaware that there are better ways to dispose of paint wastes. Certainly, there are times when water is polluted from paint wastes because people are either ignorant of the law or don't care about the environment. To prevent serious and harmful effects on the environment, wastes must be disposed of properly. Therefore, it is important that painters and decorators know about both the information set out in this document and the consequences of improperly disposing of paint wastes.

WHAT IS UNLAWFUL DISPOSAL?

Paint or wastewater attributed to painting and decorating activities, is considered to be disposed of unlawfully if it is being put: directly into a stormwater drain or stormwater drainage network in any place from which the wastes may enter and pollute a natural waterway. Similarly, disposal into a drain or pipe that form part of the sewerage system may also be considered to be unlawful, unless the painter has sought permission from Power and Water Corporation.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PAINT WASTES ARE DISPOSED OF WRONGLY?

Water-based paints

If water-based paints and their wastewater are put into a stormwater drain or sewer they may eventually pollute natural waterways. The paints contain a solid pigment that can increase the turbidity of water. As well as making the waterway look unsightly, the increased turbidity may cause particles to clog the gills of fish, restricting their breathing. Increased turbidity can also block out sunlight, reducing photosynthesis in plants. The paints contain biodegradable substances such as surfactants and cellulose thickeners, which, as they break down, can reduce oxygen levels in the water, threatening the survival of fish and other aquatic organisms. Water-based paints contain small amounts of other chemicals too.

Solvent-based paints

Putting solvent-based paints into stormwater drains or sewers may also cause pollution. Solvent-based paints contain organic solvents and other organic compounds. These substances mix only sparingly with water. As they are slowly broken down in water, they deprive aquatic organisms of the oxygen they need to survive. The toxic nature of chemicals in solvent-based paints may also cause tumors to form in animals such as fish. These paints can contain heavy metals such as lead, chromium, mercury and zinc. Heavy metals accumulate in the environment and can lead to long-term problems like sediment contamination and poisoning throughout the food chain. This can eventually affect humans.

THE LEGISLATION

Section 16 of the *Water Act* prohibits people from polluting waters. This includes allowing pollution to occur and placing substances in a position where they are likely to directly or indirectly cause pollution. Disposing of wastes from painting into waters constitutes pollution. Under Section 16 of the Act; any person or body corporate may be guilty of an offence, and liable to punitive action under the *Environmental Offences and Penalties Act* 1996. These penalties can involve a fine of up to $1000. More serious breaches of the *Water Act* can attract a penalty of up to $1,250,000 for a corporation, or up to $250,000 and/or two years imprisonment for an individual.

Similarly such an activity may be considered an environmental nuisance under the *Waste Management and Pollution Control Act* 1998. An authorised officer, as appointed under section 70 of the same Act, may give an infringement notice to anyone who causes an environmental nuisance. At the authorised officers' discretion, based on the nature of the pollution incident, an individual or body corporate may be liable to punitive action under the *Environmental Offences and Penalties Act* 1996. These penalties can involve a fine of $100 for an individual and $500 for a body corporate.

HOW PAINTERS SHOULD DISPOSE OF WASTES

Below is a summary of important procedures that painters and decorators should follow when they are cleaning their equipment. If they use this document they will help protect the natural aquatic environment.

Water-based paints

Do

- transfer as much paint as you can from rollers, brushes and trays back into the paint containers at the end of the day or job;
- transfer the water used to clean one roller tray into the next tray to be cleaned, and so on;
- spin brushes and roller sleeves (if possible) into a waste paint drum before you wash them; let the waste paint dry and dispose of it as solid waste;
- wash brushes and roller sleeves in a pail using as little water as possible;
- re-use the water used to clean painting equipment where practicable (for example, use it for cleaning again the following day);
- place all wastewater from equipment cleaning into larger drums and allow the solids to settle;
- dispose of wastewater by tipping it on to a flat, grassy area or area of soil that can retain the liquid; put it in a place where it won't run into any sewer, stormwater drain or natural waterway; and
- dispose of solid waste by sealing it and placing it for disposal with other solid waste (which is taken to a waste transfer station).

Don't

- wash brushes, rollers and trays by flushing them under running water that ends up in either the sewer, stormwater network or natural waterways;
- empty paint wastewater into any drain or natural waterway or at a point from which it can reach a drain or waterway; and
- dispose of the solid waste along with household waste.

Latex-based paints

Latex paints can be left to dry by removing the lid and allowing the water portion to evaporate. This should be done in an area, which is away from children and animals. Allow the remaining paint to dry completely. The container can then be disposed of in your household trash. Leave the lid off the can so that your household refuse haulier can see that the paint is hardened.

Solvent-based paints

Do

- transfer as much paint as possible from rollers back into paint containers at the end of the day or job;
- minimise the amount of solvent used in cleaning; transfer the solvent used to clean one tray into the next tray to be cleaned and so on;
- if possible spin brushes and roller sleeves into a drum for solvent wastes after cleaning them in a minimum amount of solvent; place all solvent into this drum and keep a lid tightly on it to stop harmful substances evaporating;
- re-use the solvent used to clean painting equipment where practicable (for example, use it for cleaning again the following day);
- contact the Environment, Heritage and the Arts Division to seek clarification of proper disposal; and
- dispose of solid waste by sealing it and placing it for collection by an appropriate waste contractor.

Don't

- dispose of used solvent by tipping it down any drain leading to the sewer or stormwater network, or into any natural waterway or at any point from which it can reach a stormwater drain or natural waterway; and
- dispose of the solid waste along with household waste.

Solvent-based paints (alkyd or oil-based) require special disposal practices. Solvent-based paints are ignitable and present particular hazards. These products should not be disposed of down storm drains, household drains (especially if you have a septic tank), or on the ground. They should be disposed of as a hazardous waste. Generally the agreed practice is to collect and store such wastes until there is sufficient quantity to be collected by an approved waste contractor. Speak to your waste contractors (numbers in the Yellow Pages) as to what quantities are economically viable to be collected for your location. These substances will generally be transported south where facilities exist for the destruction of these hazardous wastes.

Paint thinners, turpentine, mineral spirits and solvents should not be poured down a storm drain or sewer. With a few simple steps, you can reuse these types of products. Let used turpentine or brush cleaners sit in a closed container until the paint particles settle out. Then pour off the clear liquid, which can be reused. Add an absorbent (i.e. cat litter or purpose designed chemical absorbents) to the remaining residue and let it dry completely. This can then be disposed of landfill.

Where you have any queries regarding this guidance, contact the **Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport, Environment, Heritage and the Arts Division on telephone (08) 8924 4139** for disposal guidance.

For more information, contact:

Environment Heritage and the Arts Division
Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport
PO Box 496, PALMERSTON NT 0831
Tel 08 8924 4139
Fax 08 8924 4053
Email environment.nretas@nt.gov.au