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Commercial car washes use less water than home

By Tom Watson

Special to *The Seattle Times*

I hate washing the car. My new Hummer is just so big, it takes forever to wash.

No, wait, that's just a nightmare I had. My real car could probably fit in a Hummer's glove box. I don't even drive my car every day, but it still gets dirty. And if I put off washing it, I'm not doing the car or the environment any favors. Keeping your stuff clean and nice generally makes it last longer — that's waste prevention.

But isn't washing your auto bad for the environment? Not necessarily. You can minimize the environmental impacts and still have a clean car. Two key things to keep in mind:

- Commercial car washes are much better than home car washing, from an environmental standpoint.
- If you must wash the car at home, don't do it on a paved driveway or on the street. Soap and other residue can run down storm drains and end up in Puget Sound, Lake Washington or other waterways. Wash it on the grass instead, so the ground can filter the water.

People are often surprised to hear that commercial car washes use less water. Full-service or gas station car washes use only 15 to 45 gallons of water per car, while the average home wash uses more than 110 gallons, according to several car wash industry and municipal government sources. A self-service, coin-operated car wash uses only 8-15 gallons of water per four-minute cycle.

Commercial car washes conserve water by using special nozzles that add air, creating high water pressure. A home car-washer can reduce water use by using a high-pressure, trigger spray nozzle, but it still won't be as efficient. Some commercial car washes also filter and reuse their water. And all the waste goes into the sewer system.

The biggest problem with home car washes is that soap and oily residue ends up in the storm drains. Under the federal Clean Water Act, commercial car washes can't send their dirty water to storm drains. But the legions of home car-washers sure do.

Because of the problem of run-off into storm drains, the city of Calgary, Alberta, forbids home car washing with soap.

What about the charity fund-raiser car wash in a parking lot? I hate to say it, but those events are a bad idea, unless the fund-raisers make sure the water doesn't go into a storm drain.



HEATHER MCKINNON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Luckily, the Puget Sound Car Wash Association has a program to help charities raise money with car washes, without hurting the environment. In this program, nonprofit organizations raise money by selling tickets redeemable at professional car washes. More than 40 car washes in King, Snohomish and Pierce counties participate, including the Elephant Car Wash and Brown Bear chains. For details, see www.charitycarwash.com.

Another option for charities is a "car wash kit," including a pump and other equipment, to divert the soapy water away from storm drains. King County offers grants to help schools and nonprofits purchase these kits (<http://dnr.metrokc.gov/carwash>).

You may want to wash the car at home to save money. A basic commercial car wash usually runs \$5 to \$8, while a self-service wash costs about \$2 for four minutes. But the costs for home car washes can also add up. Soaps, waxes and countless other products for home car washes fill up a whole aisle at the auto supply store. New products fiercely compete for the home car-washer's dollar.

For example, take Procter & Gamble's new Mr. Clean AutoDry Carwash system. This product has some pluses: a trigger nozzle for your hose that limits water use; a deionized water system that won't leave water spots, so you don't have to use rags or towels to wipe the car dry; and soap that doesn't contain harmful phosphates. But your costs include the initial Mr. Clean system (\$20 to \$30, depending if it's on sale), refills for the special soap (\$7), refills for the filter (\$8, for 10 uses), your other supplies and the water.

At that price, and considering the environmental angle, why not just go to the car wash?

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