

Scoop the poop

Clean up after your pet

Tribune Editorial

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Here's the scoop on dog waste: It pollutes our water. Fecal coliform and other organisms from pet excrement that gets into water can cause disease in humans and other pets. The best way to keep dog feces out of our water is to clean up after our dogs. It's easier and less costly to do that than to try to kill or eliminate disease-causing organisms during water treatment.

Still, some dog owners refuse to join the poop patrol. In one survey in a community on Chesapeake Bay, about half of dog owners who admitted they don't clean up after their animals said that nothing would make them do it: not fines, not neighbors' complaints, not improved collection or disposal methods. Men are more resistant than women, proving that pigs often walk dogs.

Nevertheless, laws rightly require dog owners to clean up after their animal companions. It's just good manners and good public health.

Salt Lake County has a law that requires owners to pick up after their pooches on both public and private property. Salt Lake City has a similar law, as does West Jordan. Sandy and West Valley City have laws that require people to pick up after their pets on public property.

Salt Lake City has long had laws that restrict dogs in the watershed -- the hillsides and canyons above water treatment plants that harbor the sources of the city's drinking water.

State and local water quality officials are studying the extent of pollution caused by dog and other animal and human waste with an eye to determining whether further restrictions or public education campaigns are necessary.

Studies in other areas of the nation have shown that dog waste is a major source of water pollution. In one, about 95 percent of the coliform bacteria in storm water was attributed to non-human sources. In another, about 20 percent of the bacteria samples that could be matched to host animals were traced to dogs.

Waste will decompose, of course, but bacteria and other organisms can remain in groundwater for long periods. Soils can filter water supplies eventually, but that depends on soil conditions and other variables. Generally, shallow ground water is not free of contamination.

So it is important for people to clean up after their pets. That reduces disease-causing germs in both drinking water and in the lakes and streams that are playgrounds for people and pets alike.