

# Snow provides proof of urban runoff pollution

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Are you a stormwater pollution skeptic? Do you tend to think that all the talk about runoff causing water pollution is just an urban legend designed to distract us from more important topics?

If you are the "seeing is believing" type, then winter is the perfect time to actually see what urban runoff pollution is all about.

Everyone reacts a bit differently to the sight of a pristine white blanket of new-fallen snow. My girls hope for a snow day and look forward to sledding or building a snowman. My husband and I groan at the thought of the shoveling in store for us. We all start thinking about hot chocolate and maybe curling up by a fire.

Almost everyone admires the beauty of a fresh, unspoiled snow-covered landscape. We laugh at our children sticking out their tongues to catch snow and rolling in it to make snow angels.

Now fast-forward a few days. That clean white blanket is trampled and muddied. Snow mountains are piled at the edges of our roads and parking lots. The piles start to look gray, and then black, as winter progresses. We can clearly see where dogs have been walked at the roadside. The snow on our lawns might be speckled or pockmarked with darker particles.

Little ones inclined to eat the snow now are more likely to be scolded than photographed. "Yucky, don't eat that!" We can see with our eyes and intuitively know this snow, exposed to exhaust from our vehicles, soot from our fireplaces and waste from our pets, is no longer clean.

Yet this snow is going to melt. It is going to become part of the lakes and streams in our communities and watersheds.

The process that dirties our snow before our eyes in winter, this deposition of particles, soot, dribbles and drops, actually goes on all year. We just can't see this stuff accumulating on our driveways, rooftops, parking lots and lawns without the nice white snow to provide the visual contrast. It is still there.

The graying of the snow is visual proof of the many connections between our land, air and water in urban and suburban areas alike.

There is a lot we can do to keep the snow whiter and the water cleaner year-round.

Take an extra moment to pick up your pet waste. Your neighbors and the environment both benefit.

Think twice about idling your car excessively. Keeping warm is essential, but keeping excessive car and truck exhaust out of the environment is important, too.

Minimize your use of snow-melting chemicals. Safety is crucial, but keeping chemicals out of the environment also is beneficial.

As with all things, balance is the key.