



No Butts About It

By Mo Loden, Watershed Program Manager



Did you know that cigarette butts are the most common type of litter found in the U.S. and worldwide? According to data from the Ocean Conservancy’s annual International Coastal Cleanup, which coincides with AWG’s Creek Day and the Great Sierra River Cleanup, cigarette butts have been the number one most picked up item every year since the cleanup

began over 20 years ago. In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that approximately 14% of the adult population smoked cigarettes. So how is it that only 14% of the population is creating the number one most commonly found litter item across the country? A tobacco industry study conducted last spring found that 25% of adult smokers throw their cigarette butts on the ground because they “think it is a normal way to dispose of a cigarette.” This dirty habit needs to become socially unacceptable for a long list of reasons.

Cigarette butt litter is not only a public nuisance decreasing the aesthetics of the places we live, work, and play in, but it is contaminating and harming our ecosystems. A major concern that every Californian can relate to is the threat of discarded butts starting wildfires. That alone should encourage everyone to properly dispose of cigarette butts. Cigarette butts may eventually break down, but that is not the same as biodegradable. The plastic in the filter plus nicotine, ethyl phenol, heavy metals, and other chemicals found in tobacco remain in the environment for many years after the cigarette butt itself has fallen apart. Improperly discarded cigarette butts leach hazardous chemicals into the soil and waterways that can be extremely toxic to aquatic organisms. In their “Toxicity of Cigarette Butts, and Their Chemical Components, to Marine and Freshwater Fish” study, San Diego State University (SDSU) found that just one butt per one liter of water was toxic enough to kill half of the fish. Some cigarette chemicals may bioaccumulate and cause other environmental risks as well.

Cigarettes aren’t just hazardous to your health, they are hazardous to the environment. As SDSU’s Dr. Thomas Novotny points out, cigarette butts should be considered hazardous waste under California law, but currently there are no labels warning smokers that the butts need to be disposed of as such. Many consumers are aware of other common household items that are classified as hazardous waste, and they have learned to properly dispose of such items, like batteries and leftover paint. So why aren’t the same standards applied to cigarette butts?

Cigarettes have very few redeeming characteristics. This article only covers butt litter and doesn’t include the other environmental devastations that tobacco products create, from the use of many toxic chemicals to make cigarettes and their packaging, to the newest threat of improperly disposing of e-cigarettes. They are understandably addictive due to the nicotine. So, whether or you are a smoker, non-smoker, former smoker, or currently trying to quit, we need to ban together to spread the word that disposing of cigarettes on the ground is not only environmentally damaging but also not socially acceptable. I think the best solution for tobacco product waste is to stop smoking, but if you can’t, please find a trash can for your butts!

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Alpine Watershed Group is your local environmental organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing Alpine County’s watersheds for future generations. We host public meetings on the second Tuesday of odd-numbered months. All are welcome to join us to learn about and discuss local environmental issues. Our next meeting is on Tuesday, July 13, at 5:30 p.m. We have been meeting via Zoom since the pandemic. Please visit www.alpinewatershedgroup.org, call (530) 694-2327, or email Mo Loden at awg.mo.loden@gmail.com for details or to sign up for our monthly email newsletter.

Cigarette butts are toxic to the environment.
Help keep our watershed healthy!

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TOBACCO-FREE
Alpine County Tobacco Control Program

