

Keeping flushables moving

Cross-industry and cross-country collaborations aim to wipe out blockages.

By **Brianne Nakamur**, Water Environment Federation Collections Systems and Sustainability Manager, and **Lesley Smith**, Water New Zealand Technical Coordinator.

Many products in grocery store aisles carry warnings such as “toxic”, “do not consume”, “keep out of reach of children”, and even “dangerous for the environment”. Yet flushable wipes, for household cleaning and hygiene, have very few, if any, warnings about the harm that they can cause when flushed down the toilet.

The issue first surfaced in this journal in the March 2015 edition. Since then, Water New Zealand has been working both with international organisations and local representatives of wipes manufacturers and suppliers to address the problems caused by incorrect wipes disposal.

The mystery of the s-bend

Recently wipes have been getting a flurry of attention, with articles appearing across a range of print and digital media. Despite this coverage, what lies beyond the toilet s-bend remains a mystery to most public, to the dismay of those of us involved in the wastewater industry.

To raise consumer awareness of what can and can't be flushed, Water New Zealand members have been collaborating with the Ecolabelling Trust and the New Zealand Food and Grocery Council (FGC).

The FGC is an industry association that represents well-known brands responsible for the manufacture and supply of wipes. The council has produced a simple video explaining why toilets shouldn't be treated as a rubbish bin.

This video, along with a supporting press release and key messages, has been produced for local authorities to help spread the message and raise awareness about the problems caused by flushing wipes. These resources are available for download from: www.waternz.org.nz/wipesblockage.

A new and improved labelling guideline

Back in January, INDA and EDANA, the US and International Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, released the latest edition of their Code of Practice, called *Communicating Appropriate Disposal Pathways for Nonwoven Wipes to Protect Wastewater Systems*.

This code provides a set of voluntary guidelines to help manufacturers better communicate the appropriate disposal pathways for nonwoven products, such as baby wipes and flushable wipes. The revised edition outlines stricter labeling guidelines for non-flushable wipes and hygiene products (see box story).

Although the code is voluntary, manufacturers are encouraged to comply with it within 18 months of its release.

By encouraging a more prominent and uniform positioning of the ‘Do Not Flush’ warning, the code enables consumers to

better recognise and identify what not to flush.

This new version of the code was developed with the input from wastewater professionals across North America. The FGC and Water New Zealand are now collaborating to encourage local adoption of this code.

An international problem

The new code follows a series of stalled negotiations over the establishment of an international ‘flushability standard’.

In 2015, the International Standards Organization (ISO) launched a work group to establish a standard. The group was made up of 15 countries, with our country participating as an observer. However, in September 2016, negotiations over an International Standard came to an indefinite halt, due to a complaint from the ISO Toilet Paper Working Group.

At the same time, attempts to establish guidelines also came to a standstill. North American wastewater associations then began collaborating with INDA, a global association of the nonwoven fabric industry, to develop the fourth edition of the ‘Flushability Guidelines’. However, disagreements between wipes manufacturers and wastewater sector experts led to the wastewater industry withdrawing from the development of the guidelines.

In response to the breakdown in negotiations, international wastewater groups issued a joint position statement on non-flushable and flushable labeled products as follows:

“To prevent problems with sewers, pipe and toilet blockages, plus the human and environmental cost of sewer flooding and pollution, the organisations signing this statement below agree that:

Only the 3Ps – pee, poo and toilet paper – should be flushed.
“Currently, all wipes and personal hygiene products should



When disposed of into the sewer wipes bind together in a process known as ragging.



Wipes bound with fat and oil and grease being removed from a blocked wastewater pump station.

be clearly marked as 'Do Not Flush' and be disposed of in the bin or trashcan.

“Wipes labelled 'Flushable' based on passing a manufacturers' trade association guidance document should be labelled 'Do Not Flush' until there is a standard agreed by the water and wastewater industry.

“Manufacturers of wipes and personal hygiene products should give consumers clear and unambiguous information about appropriate disposal methods.

“Looking to the future, new innovations in materials might make it possible for certain products to be flushed, if they pass a technical standard which has been developed and agreed by the water and wastewater industry. Preferably this standard would be developed under the banner of the International Standards Organization (ISO).

“Key requirements for any standard include that the product: breaks into small pieces quickly; must not be buoyant; does not contain plastic or regenerated cellulose; and only contains materials that will readily degrade in a range of natural environments.”

Since the release of this statement in September 2016, the international position statement has been signed by 244 wastewater companies and authorities, and 69 partner organisations from 25 countries. Here, both Watercare and Wellington Water became signatories.

Improvements to the second edition Code of Practice



Clearer decision tree of what should have a 'Do Not Flush' warning. Any product that can be used in a bathroom setting is encouraged to be labelled with the DNF warning. Products that can be contaminated by faeces, menses, or urine are required to have the DNF symbol.

A bigger and clearer 'Do Not Flush' warning. The DNF warning must be in high contrast to the product packaging and is sized based on a ratio to the packaging.

More prominent display of the 'Do Not Flush' warning. The DNF warning must be prominently and permanently displayed on the product packaging near the point of dispensing as well as visible on the on-shelf packaging. This allows consumers to see the symbol both when purchasing and when using.

Get involved

Water New Zealand encourages its members to support the international campaign by promoting the following messages in local communities:

- Our wastewater systems have only been designed for poo, pee and toilet paper
- Our toilets are not rubbish bins
- The consequences of flushing wipes products creates expensive, messy problems for individuals, wastewater operators and the environment.

For further supporting resources go to: www.waternz.org.nz/wipesblockage. **WNZ**