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Survey on Poop: Half don't scoop; Neighborhoods seeking solutions

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Among topics that raise a stink in neighborhoods, it's hard to top dog poop.

And for good reason. A new survey has found that nearly half of North Carolina dog owners don't scoop the poop -- even though Raleigh, Cary, Durham and other communities have laws requiring it.

"It's a big water-quality problem," said Chrystal Bartlett, stormwater awareness and outreach coordinator for the state Department of Environment and Natural Resource. "It's also an aesthetic problem."

Homeowners point to brown spots in their lawn. Kids track the smelly goop into the house. Lawn lovers hose down their mowers when they've run over a pile.

Raleigh issues one to two \$50 citations a week for the offense.

Jennifer Burch, community manager at Wakefield Plantation and other neighborhoods, gets six to 12 dog-waste complaints a month from each of the nine communities she manages. Often the callers are furious.

"I just wish we could fix the problem indefinitely," said Burch, who puts reminders in newsletters and encourages people to talk to their neighbors.

But most people don't relish confronting neighbors about their unneighborly behavior.

Cary issues few of its \$20 citations, despite getting daily complaints, because people won't give their names, said Shelly Davis, a Cary animal control officer.

It's no surprise we have poop problems. About 1.8 million dogs live in North Carolina and deposit 681 tons of the stuff a day, estimated Bartlett, the state stormwater awareness coordinator.

Those dogs don't clean up after themselves. And, the new survey says, neither do their owners.

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In North Carolina, 47 percent of urban dog-walkers, 49 percent in the suburbs and 59 percent in rural areas rarely or never pick up after their dog, according to the 2005 survey conducted by the state and East Carolina University's Center for Survey Research. People aged 35 to 54 are least likely to pick up after their pets. Women were more likely than men to scoop it up.

At the dog park at Millbrook Exchange Park in North Raleigh, Kristi Rogers said she cleans up after her dog.

"I don't want to step in it when I take him out again, and I don't want other people to step in it," Rogers said.

Michel Weston, who often walks her dog on greenways, said she has approached people who don't clean up after their dog there. Weston said they said they didn't clean it up because it was off the trail. Weston pointed out it was still close to a stream.

In fact, dog poop and other animal and bird excrement is one of the leading polluters of lakes, rivers and other waterways, said Rachel Noble, a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill's Institute of Marine Sciences in Morehead City.

It's unlikely that somebody would get sick from swimming in a pond contaminated with dog poop, Noble said, though it's possible. At the same time, high levels of waste can muck up streams and ponds, she said.

"It's a particular problem in more heavily populated areas," she said.

And don't forget parasites, such as roundworm and hookworm, which are found in feces and can infect people through contact, said Julie Packard, immediate past president of the N.C. Veterinary Medical Association.

Larvae can stay in the environment for a long time, Packard said, even after the poop is gone.

Because of the risks to water and health, the state's environmental education office began in May to offer postcards urging people to pick up the poop. About 22,000 were ordered last month alone by veterinarians, along with neighborhoods, civic groups, towns and cities.

Hints and solutions

To combat the problem, neighborhoods are trying to cater to dog owners.

PPM, a property management company in the Triangle, has made dog waste stations -- consisting of bags and a trash can -- the standard in new neighborhoods, said Burch.

In Harrington Grove in northwest Raleigh, piles of No. 2 were often found on sidewalks or off the neighborhood's walking trail. Now, there are "mutt mitts," plastic gloves for picking up poop, on the trail and near trash cans. The neighborhood also has put reminders in its newsletter. Both efforts have helped.

"There's a lot of things we have to keep reminding people about, and that's one of them," said Herb Hernandez, homeowners association president and dog owner.

Still, they don't always work.

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Sharon Baynes, owner of Scoop-n-Doo, a dog waste service, said she still finds piles of the stuff near the waste stations she maintains in a Durham neighborhood.

Chris Gonzalez, owner of Poop Away, hopes to expand his business to apartments and subdivisions. Right now, homeowners with dogs hire him to clean up their own yards. He's hauled away as much as 27 gallons in one yard -- perhaps a sign that some dog owners treat the property of others as they would their own.

Some just try to solve the problem with not-so-subtle reminders.

Every morning, a man walking his dog would stop in front of Charles Neely's house or his neighbor's leaving a pile of poop.

"It was the same thing every day," said Neely, who lives in southwest Raleigh.

Neely bought signs depicting a dog doing his business, blocked out in red. Two are in his yard. Another is in his neighbor's lawn.

"The signs did stop it," he said. "People respect the sign. They should respect the neighborhood."

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WHO DOESN'T SCOOP

Don't blame the kids or their grandparents.

A survey of 1,000 people across the state by the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources and East Carolina University Center for Survey Research, found that people aged 18 to 24 years and 65 years and older are most likely to report they always or often pick up pet waste.

Two age groups tied for the least likely to pick up poop: 35- to 44-year-olds and 45- to 54-year-olds.

Women also are more likely to scoop it up. The survey found that 35 percent of women report that they always or often pick up waste compared to 28 percent of men. About 57 percent of men said they rarely or never picked it up, compared to 46 percent of women.

The survey, which was conducted in August and September, has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

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GRAPHIC: It's dogs like the one on the left that keep Chris Gonzalez, far right, in business. Homeowners make up most of the clients for Poop Away, a waste-removal service Gonzalez owns. But he hopes to expand to apartments and subdivisions. Staff Photos by Lisa Lauck

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Charles Neely, a Raleigh homeowner, says this sign he posted in his front yard deters inconsiderate dog-walkers.

Chris Gonzalez works in the backyard of a client for Poop Away. Gonzalez says that as his business expands, he'll hire others to help with the dirty work.

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