

Tossed cigarettes new pollution target of Coastal Cleanup Day

By Lisa M. Krieger

9/20/2014

Small as a twig and the color of a quartz pebble, a discarded cigarette butt is easy to overlook.

But tobacco litter is one of the worst pollution problems facing San Francisco Bay today -- and a major focus of Saturday's California Coastal Cleanup Day, the state's largest volunteer event.

"Toxic tea bags," said Ralph Boniello of El Cerrito, who organized 58 volunteers with the Alameda Creek Alliance in Fremont to find and pull out 116 pounds of trash and 63 pounds of recycling.

"Imagine how tea is released into water," he said. "That's what cigarette butts do when they get into our creeks."

Hundreds of volunteers -- armed with plastic gloves and disposable trash bags -- gathered at Bay Area parks, beaches and creeks to remove tons of trash as part of Coastal Cleanup Day, sponsored by the California Coastal Commission.

The commission says cigarette butts are the top source of trash. Casually flicked onto the ground or into gutters, they wash into streams and then the bay, where they pollute water and harm wildlife. On Saturday, volunteers retrieved them from picnic areas, along trails, under bridges and in the flotsam and jetsam of scenic sandy beaches.

The group Save The Bay is calling on cities throughout the Bay Area to stop the litter at its source, by adopting and enforcing outdoor smoking bans that keep cigarettes off the streets and out of the bay.

It estimates that 3 billion cigarette butts are littered each year in Bay Area communities.

"They take a long time to biodegrade and wash out where they choke wildlife," said Peter Drekmeier of Palo Alto, a leader of volunteers along San Francisquito Creek, whose tributaries drain the eastern slope of the Santa Cruz Mountains into the towns of Palo Alto, Menlo Park and East Palo Alto.

Also found: orange plastic traffic cones, bike frames, a garden umbrella, shoes, tires, a lawn chair. Even part of a bed frame.

In most of California, stormwater does not pass through a water treatment plant. That means litter and pollutants carried into the storm drain system by wind and water flow directly into creeks and the bay, where they harm fish, marine mammals and birds.

This year's big success story is plastic bags. Most Bay Area communities now ban single-use plastic bags, and volunteers Saturday reported deep reductions in bag sightings, compared with previous years. Gov. Jerry Brown is poised to sign a statewide ban, making California the first state to outlaw the plastic bags.

"By working locally, we can repeat this success with cigarette butts," said Allison Chan, Clean Bay campaign manager for Save The Bay, a San Francisco-based group that co-organized a team with REI at San Jose's Watson Park.

People tend to think of cigarettes as just paper and organic debris, not a pollution problem, said Cyril Manning, also of Save The Bay.

"But every filter is plastic and full of chemicals and toxins," he said.

Increasingly, cities are restricting outdoor smoking. But if the laws are not comprehensive throughout the city -- with smoking banned in one place and allowed within a certain number of feet of a building in another -- the butt litter problem continues, according to Chan.

The cleanest cities are those with a widespread ban on outdoor public smoking, such as Walnut Creek, she said.

"If it's clear to the public and clear to law enforcement, compliance is better," she said. "Cigarettes need to be discarded in receptacles."

Saturday's volunteers not only cleaned up, but acted as citizen-scientists, helping Save The Bay build a database to prove cigarettes are a problem.

"They tell us where the hot spots are," Chan said. "They tell us what kind of trash they're finding and what is most prevalent."

Last year's tobacco hot spots were Mountain View, where volunteers picked up an average of 20 butts each; Redwood City, with 13 butts each; and San Jose, with nine butts each. Save The Bay is now working with those cities to tighten or better enforce outdoor-smoking laws.

"Volunteers are not just cleaning up, but they're becoming part of a bigger solution," Chan said, "gathering data that is needed to influence policy."

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San Francisco Bay's Cigarette BUTT Hot spots

Using data gathered from California Coastal Cleanup Day 2013, Save The Bay identified the 16 cities with some of the worst cigarette litter problems in the region:

Alameda: 19 butts per volunteer

Antioch: 12

Belmont: 17

Hercules: 16

Livermore: 19

Marin County: 13

Martinez: 10

Mountain View: 20

Novato: 7

Pittsburg: 17

Redwood City: 13

San Francisco: 35

San Jose: 9

San Rafael: 13

Suisun City: 34

Vallejo: 11

BY THE NUMBERS

In Contra Costa County and Alameda counties, 2,735 volunteers with the Watershed Project collected 23,700 pounds of trash -- including a plastic human skeleton and a set of false teeth. They were aided by 12 kayakers, collecting trash that couldn't be reached at the 30 land-based sites.

future creek project

On Sunday, Sept. 28, volunteers will clean up at the Guadalupe River in San Jose. To help, go to

www.jvalley.org/pages/community-relations-council, call 408-357-7504 or email eric@envirospectives.com