

Hazardous Waste Factsheet

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Managing Used Shop Towels and Contaminated Absorbent Materials

Shop towels and absorbent materials are common items around many businesses. Shop towels, including durable cloth wipers, rags, or disposable towels, are commonly used to spread cleaners and wipe oil, grease, dirt, ink and other substances from parts and surfaces.

In addition to shop towels, businesses usually stock absorbent materials around the work area to clean up spills of automotive or other industrial fluids. Items like absorbent spill pads (available in several types/shapes) and granular spill supplies (think something similar to kitty litter) are used to contain and clean up minor spills and leaks.

The Problem

As they are used, shop towels and absorbent materials can become contaminated with hazardous substances such as solvents, petroleum products and heavy metals, and are often improperly managed. Disposable shop towels and paper wipers are usually thrown away in the garbage.

Significant amounts of contaminated spill pads and granular absorbent materials end up in the garbage that goes to the Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center (the former Hawks Prairie landfill). The presence of contaminated towels and other absorbent materials in the garbage increases the health risks to sanitation workers and the costs of operating the facility.

One of the most common contaminants of shop towels are solvents, which are used by auto shops, printers, and other businesses to clean parts and equipment. Many solvents contain chemicals that are ignitable, volatile, or toxic. **Towels contaminated with solvents should not be placed in municipal trash containers and treated like regular solid waste.**

Solvents that contain chlorinated chemicals, such as methylene chloride, carbon tetrachloride, and 1,1,1-trichloroethane, are toxic and do not break down easily in the environment. Other contaminants of concern are heavy metals, which are absorbed onto towels when cleaning or preparing metal equipment parts and surfaces.

Thurston County Public
Health and Social Services
Environmental Health Division

412 Lilly Rd. NE
Olympia, WA 98506-5132
Hazardous Waste Hotline:
360-867-2664

TDD Line: 360-867-2603

<http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehhw/index.html>



Regulatory Requirements

The Solid Waste Handling Ordinance, Article V of the Thurston County Sanitary Code governs the disposal of solid waste in Thurston County. This ordinance refers directly to Article VI regarding management and disposal of hazardous wastes.

The Nonpoint Source Pollution Ordinance, Article VI of the Thurston County Sanitary Code, governs handling and disposition of hazardous waste. This ordinance requires that hazardous wastes be properly stored, and recycled or disposed of by licensed hazardous waste disposal companies.

Used shop towels, spills pads and granular absorbent materials that become contaminated with hazardous substances can designate as a hazardous waste. If so, businesses must store these materials in such a way to prevent any contaminants from entering local water resources or soils, as well as ensure proper recycling, treatment or disposal of contaminated materials by a permitted waste management vendor.

Management Options

Petroleum-contaminated Absorbent Materials

As a policy, the Thurston County Waste and Recovery will accept small numbers spill pads and granular absorbent materials contaminated with petroleum products **only**. Each year, residents may dispose of petroleum-contaminated materials, equivalent to the volume of one 55-gallon drum.

Although small amounts of petroleum-contaminated absorbent materials and shop towels will be accepted as garbage, businesses should seek to limit the amount of oily absorbent materials they generate by preventing spills and leaks from occurring in the first place.

Some easy steps you can take to limit the amount of absorbents needed include:

- Use drip pans when working under cars or machinery, and place draining pans under any removed parts.
- Use funnels when pouring used oil into waste drums to reduce the chance of a spill.
- Take the time to fix small leaks or drips instead of repeatedly tossing on more absorbent material.
- Use a reusable absorbent pad to clean out sumps and oil/water separators, and carefully wring it out completely before re-using it.

Following these simple practices does more than just keep excess petroleum-contaminated waste out of the Waste and Recovery Center. Businesses can save money in product and disposal costs, spend less time cleaning facility work areas, cut down on the chance of someone slipping or tracking oil outside the shop, and present a cleaner image to the public.

Any absorbent material contaminated with substances other than petroleum products may be a hazardous waste, and will likely need to be handled by a licensed hazardous waste management company.

Used Shop Towels

Small quantity generators can satisfy the requirements of the Nonpoint Source Pollution Ordinance by managing their used shop towels in one of the following ways:

1. Reuse soiled towels by sending them to an industrial laundry that is equipped to process used shop towels and treat residual wastewater. Please refer to a partial list of industrial laundry services on the back of this fact sheet.

Be sure to provide information to the laundry service about what contaminants may be on the towels.

2. Disposable towels that are contaminated with hazardous substances must be managed as a hazardous waste. Several companies can provide disposal services for shop towels. Check with the Business Pollution Prevention Program for a list of vendors. Reusable shop towels are recommended over disposable wipes.
3. Small numbers of shop towels soiled only with petroleum products (not solvents) may be disposed of in the municipal trash.

The following best management practices for used shop towels can make managing these materials easier, maintain a safer work environment, and keep your shop in compliance.

1. To minimize exposure to workers and decrease fire potential, make sure shop towels contaminated with hazardous substances are collected, transported, and stored in closed containers that are compatible with the materials stored in them. Consult materials safety data sheets for the hazardous products used for specific material incompatibilities or contact specialists with the Business Pollution Prevention Program at for assistance.
2. Because of fire potential, containers holding flammable materials such as solvent- saturated rags must be managed according to all local fire district standards. Containers must be sufficiently separated from all external sources of ignition and "No smoking" signs must be legible and placed at all accumulation areas. Such areas must meet the minimum property line setback requirements. Container type, color, and labels must also meet local fire district codes. Contact your local fire district for the specific requirements for these containers.
3. Remove free liquids before tossing soiled shop towels into containers. This can be done by carefully pressing the towels while wearing appropriate safety equipment such as chemical resistant gloves, eye protection and respiratory protection. Rags may not be left out to air dry to evaporate excess solvents. Free liquids should be collected and reused, or, if not reusable, managed as a separate hazardous waste stream.
4. Do not dispose of waste solvents, sludges or inks by pouring them into containers of used shop towels. If you do, the saturated rags cannot be laundered through industrial cleaning facility. Instead, these materials would need to be managed as a hazardous waste.

Industrial Laundry Services

Vendor Name	Location	Phone Number
AlSCO	Tacoma, WA	253-474-9446
Aramark Uniform Services	Kent, WA	800-873-7041
Cintas	Puyallup, WA	800-732-2022
Overall Laundry Services	Seattle, WA	800-683-7255
Rezorb Environmental	Woodinville, WA	425-489-2895
Superior Linen Service	Tacoma, WA	800-232-1012

Additional Information

If you have questions about disposal of petroleum-contaminated soils, please call the Solid Waste Program of the Thurston County Health Department, (360) 867-2580 or TDD (360) 867-2603, during regular business hours.

If you have questions about storing and handling used shop towels, or about how to determine if a towel or absorbent material designates as a hazardous waste, please call the Thurston County Business Pollution Prevention Program at (360) 867-2664; the TDD line is 867-2603.

Additional fact sheets for small businesses regarding proper storage, handling, and disposal of hazardous materials and wastes can be viewed on our program website: <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehhw/index.html>