

Flushable gripes

# Sanitary sewer chiefs don't trust the 'flushable' label on wet wipes

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Anniston Water Works Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior looks at debris trapped at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star

Ask David Henson, he'll say that people will put just about anything down a sewer line.

Most often it's stuff folks consider benign, like flushable wipes, fryer grease and hygiene products, which Henson — the environmental quality superintendent for Anniston's Water Works and Sewer Board — said are among the most harmful. Sometimes it's weirder, like when he was working in Temple, Ga., where some kids shoved a folding lawn chair into a manhole behind the high school.

"I guess they didn't want to carry it back to the school," Henson said.

The metal chair caused a blockage that led to an overflow, which killed fish in a nearby pond, he said.

“It wasn’t easy trying to explain to the person who owned that pond, ‘This was sabotage,’” he recalled.

Earlier this month, [Harvest International Ministry’s sewer lines backed up and sewer water flooded from toilets onto the church floor](#). The backup wasn’t caused by lawn chairs, though; it was the benign-sounding wipes and grease, according to Ed Turner, Anniston Water Works director, and the material that caused a jam in the lines probably didn’t come from the church.

“You put wipes and grease together, you form a pretty solid wall,” Turner said Wednesday. “The problem happens somewhere else out in the system, where it can back up into a house or into a business.”

### **You can’t flush this**

Strictly speaking, keeping the sewer lines clear is a full-time job.

Several of them, in fact. Steve Junior, the Water Works plant maintenance supervisor, has a team of employees who travel along the lines, stopping at what are called “lift stations” — spots where the pipes have reached their lowest points, where water has to be pumped to push it uphill against gravity — and cleaning them out to keep debris from jamming the pumps.

According to Junior, there are 10 sewer lift stations in the system, which stretches approximately 230 miles. Each of them has at least two pumps in case one is jammed, and they’re all cleaned at least three times a week.

On Wednesday, during a tour of some Water Works facilities, Junior used a long-handled, rake-like tool to fish out about 20 wipes that might have otherwise seized the pumps at a lift station on Baltzell Gate Road. That station, just across the street from a Water Works treatment plant, is supplemented with yet another pump, a total of three.

“If a pump goes down, it stops the entire line, which is why we have a redundancy,” Junior said, standing beside the fenced-in lift station.

The small pile of wipes Junior pulled from the lift station didn’t look like much, but it was enough to cause trouble, he explained.

Wipes don’t disintegrate like toilet paper; they’ll float in sewer systems and septic tanks alike until they’re removed. Mixed with fryer grease, they’ll congeal into a sturdy, awful mass that lines sewer pipes like hardened cholesterol in an artery.

Some of it inevitably makes it to the nearby water treatment plant on Alabama 21. Junior demonstrated the filtration system there, a set of grate-like screens through which millions of gallons of water pass every day.

“You can see bits of toilet paper,” Junior said, pointing at small, wispy strands of cloth floating through the waterway. “Toilet paper is designed to go through a sewer system. Everything else you see catching on a screen is what you don’t want coming through.”

The screens collect debris carried by the water, and then they rotate like a treadmill above the water line, where the debris is blasted off the screens by a water jet into a hopper. The debris is pushed from the hopper into a compactor that crushes the water out of the debris, mashing it into a cylinder-shaped tube. At the end of the process, a sad-looking log, built from wipes and hygiene products — a lone plastic dental floss pick poked out from the side — fell from the cylinder and landed in a waiting dumpster.

Junior said he’s not sure how many pounds of compacted refuse is hauled off each week. Nobody has weighed it, he said, but anecdotally, it’s a lot.

**Photos: Grease and Debris Dumping in the Anniston Water Works Treatment System**

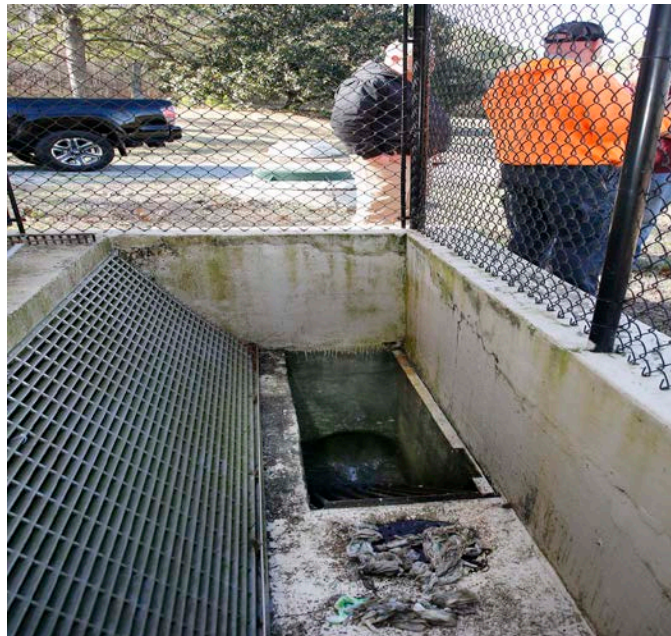
Photos of the grease and debris dumping in the Anniston Water Works treatment system.



Water flows into the McClellan lift station during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Flushable wipes that clog up the McClellan lift station system are in abundance during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Grease and trash float to the surface in a holding tank at the Meadow Park lift station during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Anniston Water Works Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior and Environmental Supervisor, David Henson look at grease in the tank at the Meadow Park lift station during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Grease and trash float to the surface in a holding tank at the Meadow Park lift station during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Anniston Water Works Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior and Environmental Supervisor, David Henson look at grease in the tank at the Meadow Park lift station during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Anniston water Works Environmental Supervisor, David Henson describes how debris and grease clog up the works at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Anniston Water Works Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior looks at debris in a dumpster ready for removal at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



A large clump of waste debris packed for removal lies in a dumpster at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star



Anniston Water Works Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior looks at debris trapped at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star





Anniston Water Works Manager, Ed Turner, Plant Maintenance Supervisor Steve Junior and Environmental Supervisor, David Henson look at debris trapped at the McClellan Waste Water Treatment Plant during a tour of the Anniston Water Works lift stations and treatment plant. Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star

## **Regulating regularity**

There's a lot of money in the sanitary wipe business — [international consulting firm Smithers estimated it'll be worth \\$21.8 billion by 2023](#) — but there's not much regulatory oversight, at least in the U.S.

According to Cynthia Finley, director of regulatory affairs for the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, the wipes industry has published a set of guidelines for flushable wipes — [the GD4](#) — but wastewater professionals feel that it's not strict enough in testing.

“GD4 is not good enough,” Finley wrote in an email Friday. “We want wipes to break apart quickly and completely, and GD4 does not require this. GD4 is also completely voluntary for the wipes industry.”

According to Finley, there aren't any regulations in the U.S. to ensure products labeled as flushable are actually safe to flush. The wipes industry and water sector did reach a consensus on labeling for non-flushable wipes, she wrote, but it requires a prominent "do not flush" logo on packages of non-flushable wipes, which she wrote are often made obscure on packaging.

Some states and territories have tried or will try legislating wipe sales; the Associated Press [reported Thursday that California was set to introduce legislation restricting the use of the "flushable" label](#) to products that had passed standards created by the [International Water Services Flushability Group](#), a global association of water service providers.

Washington D.C. rolled out a law in 2017 to restrict use of the "flushable" term; wipe manufacturer Kimberly-Clark, which owns the Cottonelle line, sued the district, [alleging that the law violated free speech rights by forcing companies that believed their wipes are flushable to carry "do not flush" iconography](#).

New York City officials have reported that their sewer system has been plagued with "fatbergs" — think icebergs — of congealed grease and wipes. [The city last year told Bloomberg News that New Yorkers spend about \\$19 million per year on transporting wipes and debris to landfills](#). The city spent millions on education campaigns to try and stem the flow — or lack thereof — of the wipes.

Attempts to reach press representatives with Kimberly-Clark and Johnson & Johnson for general information were unsuccessful Friday.

## **Sewer smarts**

Education is a big sticking point for Anniston Water Works administrators.

Turner, the Water Works director, said he didn't understand how bad flushing non-flushables really was until he took his job.

"It's huge for our customers to understand what we run into on a daily basis," he said.

Customers are often surprised to learn what can't go down their pipes at home, Henson, the environmental superintendent, said. Flushable wipes aren't necessarily flushable. Running hot tap water doesn't make it safer to put grease into water pipes; it just congeals later down the line once it cools off, which is inevitable.

He shared a few pictures on his phone of lines that had been clogged and gummed up by wipes, grease and tree roots.

"When you get a combination of the three together, you can get a real mess," Henson said. "If everybody would pay a little attention and try not to flush things down that would cause a blockage, then everyone would be in a better spot."

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