

HED: Breaking down flushables OR Keeping the matter of flushables moving

SUBHED: Manufacturers release new labelling guidelines; international wastewater groups take a stand

Brianne Nakamura

Products all along grocery store aisles carry such warnings as “Toxic! Do not consume!” “Keep out of reach of children”, or even “Dangerous for environment.”

But flushable wipes — both for household cleaning and for hygiene — carry very few, if any, warnings about the harm that they can cause when flushed down the toilet — which never should be treated as a trashcan.

A new and ‘improved’ labelling guideline

INDA, the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry (Cary, N.C.) in February 2017 released the newest edition of their Code of Practice. The new code outlines stricter labeling guidelines for “non-flushable” wipes and hygiene products. The sidebar on p. XX lists some of the improvements.

The code was first released in 2013 as a set of voluntary guidelines to help manufacturers better communicate the appropriate disposal pathways for such nonwoven products as baby wipes and flushable wipes. The code encouraged manufacturers to better label their products, but the “Do Not Flush” symbol and disposal instructions often were hidden behind flaps, on the bottoms of packaging, or presented so small and subtly that they easily could go unnoticed.

Although voluntary, manufacturers are encouraged to comply with the new code within 18-months of the release.

By encouraging a more prominent and uniform positioning of the “Do Not Flush” warning, the code enables consumers to better recognize and identify what NOT to flush.

Water sector input

This new version of the code was developed with the input from wastewater professionals. The process included representatives from Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Va.), the National Associations of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA; Washington, D.C.), the American Public Works Association (APWA; Kansas City, Mo.), and the Canadian Water & Wastewater Association (CWWA; Ottawa, Ontario, Canada).

An international problem that can’t be wiped away

Recently, wipes also have been getting an influx of international attention with media stories on fatbergs and attention from the “The Weekly” — think of an Australian version of “The Daily Show.”

In response to the wipes problem internationally, the International Standards Organization (ISO) launched a Work Group in 2015 to begin establishing an internationally flushability standard. The group consisted of 15 countries including the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Israel, and several others. U.S. representatives included members of WEF, NACWA, and APWA.

Initially progress on the ISO standard appeared to be moving faster than the U.S. wastewater collaboration with INDA on the 4th Edition Flushability Guidelines (GD4). However, in September 2016, the International Standard was halted indefinitely due to a complaint from the ISO Toilet Paper Working Group.

In response to the halted progress, the international wastewater groups working through the ISO process issued a joint position statement. Titled, *International water industry position statement on non-flushable and 'flushable' labelled products*, the document can be downloaded at <http://www.wef.org/advocacy/policy-and-position-papers>.

The position statement addresses the following:

- Key requirements for flushability include that a product must break into small pieces quickly, must be buoyant, and must not contain plastic or regenerated cellulose.
- All “flushable” labelled wipes should NOT be flushed until there is a standard that the water and wastewater industry agrees upon.
- All wipes and personal hygiene products should be clearly labeled as “Do Not Flush” and disposed of in a trashcan.
- Manufacturers should provide consumers with clear information on appropriate product disposal.
- And, most importantly, the wastewater industry only supports the flushing of the 3Ps – Pee, Poop, and (toilet) Paper.

Since its release in September, the international position statement has been signed by 25 countries, including 244 wastewater companies/authorities and 69 partner organizations.

States and cities take their stance

Back in the U.S., several states and cities have started their own initiatives against wipes. Recently, the Council for the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.) unanimously approved the Nonwoven Disposable Products Act of 2016. This is the first legislation in the U.S. to address the problems caused by flushable and non-flushable wipes. DC Water, which serves the D.C. area and is a leader in the wastewater sector, heavily supported the bill.

The bill prohibits the advertisement, packaging, or labeling of any nonwoven disposable product as flushable, sewer-safe, or septic-safe unless the claim is substantiated by standards set by the District Department of Energy & the Environment (DOEE). Included in the bill is a definition of “flushability;” the definition was taken directly from the aforementioned international water industry position statement.

While D.C. is the first city to make legislation, other jurisdictions also are on the path, notably New York City.

WEF continues to encourage its members to support local initiatives. This can take the form of writing letters of support and educating local representatives on the harm that these products are causing on wastewater systems.

The work doesn't stop with a guideline

As cities and states continue their fight against flushable wipes, WEF intends to do the same. After the success of the Code of Practice, WEF was optimistic about joint initiatives with INDA and wipes manufacturers. However, collaboration on the 4th Edition Flushability Guidelines (GD4), came to a standstill after heavy disagreements between the wipes manufacturers and wastewater sector experts.

As of February 2017, the wastewater associations involved in the GD4 development process (WEF, NACWA, APWA, and CWWA) have withdrawn from continuing the joint development of the flushability guidelines.

Even with the withdrawal from the GD4 process, WEF hopes to continue working on the development of future flushability guidelines to protect wastewater infrastructure. WEF will continue to work with its Flushable Task Force, Member Associations, and other volunteers to communicate the following:

- Only flush the 3Ps.
- Toilets are not trashcans.
- Communities need to know that flushing wipes and other products can harm infrastructure.

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[Sidebar]

Improvements to the 2nd 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 feces, 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.



Photo caption: The “Do Not Flush” warning should be clearly visible on all hygiene products, including baby wipes.

Photo credit: Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry (INDA)



Photo caption: The *International water industry position statement on non-flushable and “flushable” labelled products* was released in September 2016. More than 300 water companies and organizations, representing 25 countries, signed the statement.

Photo credit: Water Environment Federation