AB 818: Proper Labeling of Wet Wipes

What’s the problem with wet wipes?
- Wet wipes are really popular and are often mistakenly flushed.
- When wipes enter sewer systems they cause major damage and environmental problems.
- There is serious inconsistency in wipes labeling, making consumer confusion the main reason for these problems.
- Nearly all wipes contain plastic and when flushed contribute to microplastic pollution.

Wipes Contain Plastic
Nearly all wipes marketed as diaper wipes, household cleaning wipes, and cosmetic wipes have a significant amount of plastic in them. These are not intended to be flushed, yet regularly end up in the sewers. Plastic fibers are engineered for strength, and these wipes don’t break down, they rope together and create massive clogs that catch other debris.

Plastic Pollution
Plastic pollution is a major problem and an increased focus on limiting single use plastic products is warranted. When plastics are erroneously flushed, they shed fibers which wastewater treatment plants are not designed to remove. These fibers can be discharged into waterways and research demonstrates that microplastics have significant negative impacts on the aquatic ecosystem. Consumers should never be directed to flush wipes that are made of plastic.

Inconsistent Consumer Information
The nonwoven fabrics industry has an industry standard for labeling products as “Do Not Flush” if they are intended to be disposed of in the trash. However, while some companies abide by the standard labeling guidelines, there is a lack of consistency in labeling, and some wipes product labels have no information about disposal at all. The inconsistency in labeling coupled with the popularity of “flushable” wipes products creates consumer confusion about the proper disposal of these products.

Major Cost Burden for Local Governments to Deal with Wipes
There are significant, tangible costs for wastewater agencies to manage and clean up wipes pollution and those costs are ultimately borne by local ratepayers. Ragging and debris from improperly flushed wipes products can lead to major operations and maintenance impacts for wastewater systems, and many have had to upgrade and replace parts of their treatment systems solely to manage the influx of wipes. Equipment such as pump systems, bar screens, and large grinders are often required to manage the volume of wipes debris in the systems. The manual maintenance mandatory to remove the debris from treatment system equipment also creates worker safety concerns given the close exposure to raw sewage and the potential for being stuck by needles or other sharp objects when physically removing clogs. Wipes have also been known to cause sanitary sewer overflows at private residences and neighborhoods, which can impact water quality, can be incredibly costly to clean up, and are subject to penalties by the State Water Board.

Public agencies dedicate significant time and effort to educating the public about the proper disposal of wipes products and other pollutants. The combination of system upgrades, operations and maintenance, and public outreach campaigns to deal with this pollution is very costly for wastewater agencies, and ultimately these costs are borne by the users of the system. A new national study indicates California wastewater agencies spend $47 million annually to deal with wet wipes.

A Simple Solution: Clear Consumer Messaging
Manufacturers of wet wipes should clearly label their products so that consumers know how they should dispose of wipes. Products intended to go in the trash should be labeled “Do Not Flush.”