

Illegal Dumping

Effects and Management Practices

What is Illegal Dumping?

Illegal dumping is the discarding of waste in any area not legally designated for disposal. It happens in both rural and urban communities, commonly around streambanks, shorelines, forests, ditches, vacant lots, and alleys. Once a site is used for illegal dumping, it usually attracts more illegal activity. In Texas, illegal dumping is classified as a misdemeanor or felony offense, punishable by fines or jail time.

Common Items Dumped:

- Animal carcasses
- Tires
- Appliances
- Electronics (e-waste)
- Household trash
- Construction debris
- Chemicals, grease, and automotive fluids



Designated trash barrel, litter bags, and informational signs near a waterway in Port Lavaca, Texas. Photo credit: Cameron Castilaw, TWRI.

Dumping Harms Waterways

Items disposed of in or near waterways pollute streams, rivers, lakes, bays, and estuaries downstream. This includes materials or chemicals dumped into storm drains. Illegal dumping in waterways directly harms environmental health, public health, and recreational opportunities.

Environmental Health is Trashed

Chemicals and pollutants from dumped items can leach into soil, groundwater, and surface waters. This lowers water quality and harms plants, crops, livestock, and wildlife. Remediating untreated hazardous waste is costly and intensive.

Polluting Impacts Public Health

Pollutants can work their way into drinking water sources, including wells, through groundwater or surface waters. Dumped material can also become habitat for disease-carrying rodents, mosquitos, or other pests. Animal carcasses can raise bacteria levels in waterways to dangerous levels for both wildlife and human contact.

Illegal Dumping Harms Recreation

Exposed glass, metals, and hazardous chemicals can negatively affect recreational activities and physically harm children and adults nearby. Animal carcasses are especially unsightly and can give off foul odors. Illegal dumping lowers property values, damages community aesthetics in natural spaces, and attracts more criminal activity.

What Can Be Done to Prevent Illegal Dumping?

Offenders often dump items illegally because they don't want to pay disposal fees, don't want to put in the effort to make sure items are disposed properly, or think the community won't find their dumping site. Illegal dumping affects the whole community, and it takes the whole community to stop it. Here are a few ways you can help:

- **Lead by example.** Dispose of your waste in the proper places and encourage those around you to take the same responsibility. If household solid waste services are not available to you, look for citizen collection stations around your county. Some items, like animal carcasses, electronics, used oil, hazardous chemicals, and more may need to be taken to special facilities. Contact your local waste management provider or government for disposal instructions for specific items and for special collection events.
- **Report it.** Illegal dumping is a serious and reportable crime in Texas. When you actively witness dumping, be sure to write down the date, time, location, personal and/or vehicle description, and items dumped. Write down the exact location of any dump sites you find. This information can help law enforcement hold the offender responsible. Some communities in Texas have hotlines or online complaint forms to report offenders and sites. Visit TCEQ's "Don't Mess with Texas Water" program online to see if your area has a reporting hotline (www.tceq.texas.gov/p2/dont-mess-with-texas-water-a-way-to-report-illegal-dumping). If your community does not have a hotline, contact your local government, law enforcement, or sheriff's office. You can also make a complaint to TCEQ through their online report form (www.tceq.texas.gov/compliance/complaints) or through their toll-free hotline at 888-777-3186.
- **Participate in cleanups.** People who illegally dump are looking for places that are isolated and unmonitored. Cleaning up sites where illegal dumping happens can help break the cycle and shows offenders that the site is monitored. Organizing a cleanup event is also a great way to increase community awareness of illegal dumping and attending helps your community. Keep Texas Beautiful hosts the Keep Texas Waterways Clean program, which provides resources and information for cleanups (ktb.org/our-work/keep-texas-waterways-clean/).
- **Reduce waste.** Illegal dumping is often a by-product of excessive amounts of trash and wasteful habits. Finding ways to up-cycle or recycle used items can help cut back on waste. Look for resources in your community that can help with recycling. Donating used items that are still in working condition can help reduce waste, as well.
- **Start the conversation.** If you notice illegal dumping in your community, but have ideas on how to better address it, bring up the issue with friends, family, neighbors, waste management providers, local government, and law enforcement. Public support for recycling services, additional trash collection sites, hazardous or special material collection events, hotlines to report dumping, volunteer cleanups, and donation stations for upcycling is key in bringing these ideas to life. Communities benefit as a whole when illegal dumping is confronted, but it takes just one individual to begin the conversation.

Additional References

Cann, Victoria. Why Does Illegal Dumping Happen? How You Can Prevent It. blog.tceq.texas.gov/2022/07/13/why-does-illegal-dumping-happen-how-you-can-prevent-it/
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Illegal Dumping Control. www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-11/bmp-illegal-dumping-control.pdf

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