

THE SECRET PUMP KILLER

Gary Wilde, BPMA Technical Services Officer, believes the responsibility for dealing with the issues caused by wet wipes is currently falling to the wrong organisations.

UK reports suggest that sewer blockages caused by wet wipes being flushed down toilets are costing our water companies more than £100m every year. About 80% of all the material retrieved from sewer blockages are down to wipes. If these blockages were avoided, the water companies could reinvest this money in their infrastructure and service provision, or they could reduce their customers' bills.

Supermarket shelves are full of products that are branded as 'flushable', but flushable does not mean biodegradable. Invariably these wet wipes will end up joining a fatberg blockage in the pipework or clogging up a pump somewhere in the network. Manufacturers of these wipes know this is a problem and yet their marketing teams still promote these products under the misleading claim.

Given that around 90% of wet wipes sold in the UK are not suitable for flushing, manufacturers and retailers should promote the instruction 'do not flush' instead of the current flushable expression.

But there is currently no legislation in place to differentiate between which products should be labelled as flushable and which should be labelled as tissue. To date, the UK Government has shown little interest in asserting new regulations, preferring to encourage the wet wipe manufacturers and the water industry to develop a code of practice together.

While ordinary toilet paper degrades in a matter of hours, wet wipes will take on average about two weeks to breakdown, if at all. So, for all those flushings that take place within a short distance of a sewage treatment plant, the travel could be anything from 2-48 hours, which is not nearly long enough time for the wipes to degrade.

One way to deal with the issue is to fit cutter or grinder pumps at appropriate points throughout the network, but understandably these pump types usually incur high maintenance costs. Another drawback with this approach is that although the wet wipes are chopped up into smaller pieces – which helps to remove their clogging properties – it does nothing to remove the tiny plastic fibres they contain, which could even enter the human food chain further down the line.

Many tonnes of wet wipes, either whole or in

part, which haven't been caught up in either fatbergs or pump blockages, find their way into the inlet filters at the water treatment works. These filters, which generally consist of 6mm screens fitted into the flow of incoming wastewater, are designed to catch and remove any solids before the main treatment process. The collected material, often referred to as 'ragging', then needs to be removed and either incinerated or taken to landfill sites.

There are many sewage pumps available on the market, all with different attributes and features, and of course, technology

is increasingly playing its part in helping to improve wastewater pumping. On top of this, the pump industry will continue to invest in R&D, producing new impeller designs, anti-clog systems and the likes. But this is placing the burden on the water companies and the pump industry when one could very well argue that the only real solution is to have the problem removed at source. This means better labelling on wet wipes packaging to prevent flushing or the removal of this type of product from supermarket shelves altogether.

In short, more needs to be done by the wet wipe manufacturers, but in equal measure, by the supermarkets and the British Retail Consortium. The UK Government should also be doing far more to address the financial and environmental factors associated with this huge problem. Significantly better awareness amongst consumers would also help. ➔



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