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## The Missing Green Ingredient in Carpet Cleaning

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When it comes to greening carpet cleaning, many hotel and hospitality facilities that have taken significant steps to implement green cleaning strategies tend to overlook a key environmental concern. What's happening? Are they using environmentally preferable carpet care chemicals, spotters, and related products? In most cases, yes. Are they employing high-performance carpet extractors to more effectively remove moisture from carpets, helping to reduce drying times and prevent the growth of mold, mildew, and other contaminants? Again, in most cases, yes. To conserve water and use it more efficiently, are some properties using carpet extractors that recycle water and solution? In a growing number of situations, yes. Are they taking steps to ensure the wastewater generated as a result of cleaning carpets is properly disposed of so it does not impact waterways or the environment? In far too many cases, no, and this is where the problem lies.

Carpet extractors work by injecting water and cleaning solution into the hotel carpet using a wand. The cleaning solution adheres to dirt and grime embedded in the carpet. Using the wand again, the machine's vacuum system then "extracts" the water and cleaning solution along with the soils, leaving the carpets cleaned. This extracted solution is wastewater and it can contain a host of potentially harmful and toxic ingredients, such as bodily fluids, human and animal waste, the full spectrum of bacteria and germs, nicotine if guests are allowed to smoke in their rooms, chemical ingredients often found in detergents, bleaches, spotters, and disinfectants from previous cleanings, hair and carpet fibers.

If the wastewater is not properly disposed of, it can find its way into sensitive waterways that support aquatic, animal, and plant life and can eventually climb up into the food chain. In some cases, these ingredients can cause serious damage to fragile ecosystems, stunting plant and aquatic growth. In other cases, just the opposite is true. Some of these ingredients actually act as nutrients, promoting excessive algae growth, which can also upset ecosystems.

### Know the Law

It is very important that hotel administrators know the laws—including federal, state, and local—regarding the disposal of carpet cleaning wastewater. Not only are there serious environmental issues at stake here, but virtually every jurisdiction in the United States has some type of regulation when it comes to wastewater disposal.\* This can be true even if hotel administrators outsource carpet cleaning to private contractors. In some cases, fines for improper disposal can be imposed on both the contractor and the hiring organization, in this case the hotel.

Examples of these rules and regulations include the following:

- Wastewater cannot be released into streets, ditches, or storm sewers.
- Wastewater cannot be poured down drains of any kind if it is uncertain where they empty.
- Wastewater cannot be disposed of near residential or commercial septic tanks.
- Wastewater cannot be discharged into creeks, rivers, lakes, or similar waterways.

Fortunately, there are many disposal options available to hotel administrators. While they may not be as easy as pouring carpet cleaning wastewater down a sewer drain, they are much greener, safer for the environment, and legal as well. In many cases, carpet cleaning wastewater can be discharged by pouring it into a sink or down a toilet. As long as the amounts are not excessive, local water-treatment centers can typically handle this type of discharge.

If large amounts of wastewater are collected—for instance, if the carpets in a large section of a hotel are cleaned—the wastewater may need to be collected and disposal arranged through a local water-disposal site found in most communities. Often the wastewater must be placed in special containers that are labeled, for instance, “carpet cleaning wastewater,” including where it was collected and when.

### Wastewater Issue Often Overlooked

The disposal of carpet cleaning wastewater is really not the problem because there are many ways it can be disposed of properly. What is the issue is that many hotel properties, as well as scores of other types of facilities that have implemented a green cleaning strategy, often overlook this issue or are not aware of how potentially hazardous wastewater can be to the environment. This is why when implementing green cleaning strategies we must look at every aspect of the process. It does not necessarily end when the cleaning is completed.

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\*Many of these regulations are based on the Clean Water Act (CWA), passed by Congress in 1972 and expanded in 1977 and 1987. The goal of CWA is to protect water-quality standards throughout the United States.