

IWSFG, MESUG AND THE ISSUE OF FLUSHABLE PRODUCTS IN MUNICIPAL SEWER SYSTEMS

A BRIEF 11 YEAR SYNOPSIS

M.E.S.U.G. is an acronym for Municipal Enforcement Sewer Use Group and includes Environmental Officers, By-Law Officers, Wastewater Operators, Environmental Technicians, Managers and Administrators from across Canada.

On November 26th, 2009 I was voted in as Chairperson of the group and have continued in that capacity to date. We meet quarterly to discuss several environmental issues that each city/municipality are facing or have dealt with in the past, regarding wastewater, stormwater, by-law enforcement and changes to federal/provincial environmental laws in these areas.

Over the last 11 years we have put a lot of energy into advocating that “Toilets Are Not Garbage Cans” and that just because a manufacturer puts a flushable label on a product that does not mean that it is physically true. Currently there is no provincial or federal law, nor legally binding definition of what constitutes a ‘flushable’ consumer product.

The Association of Non-Woven Fabrics industry represents manufacturers of flushable products and has provided them with guidelines to determine the “flushability” of a product. As set out by INDA for a product to be flushable it must:

- (1) Clear toilets and properly maintained drainage pipe systems when the suppliers recommended usage instructions are correctly followed;
- (2) Passes through properly maintained wastewater conveyance systems and is compatible with wastewater treatment, reuse and disposal systems without causing system blockage, clogging or other operational problems; and
- (3) Is unrecognizable in effluent leaving on-site and municipal wastewater treatment systems and in digested sludge from wastewater treatment plants that are applied to soil.

These guidelines are voluntary, not mandatory and the testing of these “flushable” products is performed in-house by the manufacturers themselves. The criteria set out for passing these test methods are set by the manufacturers and are not stringent enough to protect the real world sanitary sewer collection system. Also, there is no enforcement factor to go along with these guidelines as terms used are ambiguous and thus unenforceable as they currently stand. The result of this is costly, not only to the municipalities operating the wastewater systems but also to the taxpayers.

In 2014, an ISO (International Organization for Standardization) initiative was commenced by Canada through ISO’s Technical Committee (TC) 224, with MESUG members, including myself, making up part of the two working groups involved. Considerable progress was made on the development of a Technical Specification regarding the quality and characteristics of products that might be considered “flushable” and how products, flushable and non-flushable, might be clearly labeled. This international committee consisted of both utility representatives as well as those in the wipes manufacturing industry. This work was nearing completion when it was halted by a challenge from the manufacturers concerning test methods.

With the suspension of the ISO work and collaboration with INDA failing, the wastewater associations joined together to form the International Water Services Flushability Group (IWSFG). The IWSFG is a group of water associations, utilities, and professionals seeking to provide clear guidance on what should and should not be flushed down the toilet to protect customers, wastewater systems, their workers, and the environment. This informal coalition put together a position statement on non-flushable and flushable labelled products which is now supported by wastewater services in 25 countries and by over 300 stakeholders. In 2017, The Town of Cobourg proudly permitted the use of the Town logo as a sign of support for this initiative.

In 2018 and with amendments in 2020 the IWSFG developed Publicly Available Specifications (PAS) for flushable products that reflect real world wastewater conditions. And, in a promising new development, the Canadian Competition Bureau reached out to MESUG in 2019 to discuss the IWSFG PAS specifications. As the Competition Bureau progresses further in their review of applicable specifications, guidelines and protocols in determining flushability, they will continue to reach out to MESUG.

It is the goal of the IWSFG that these PAS be used by standard bodies, nationally and worldwide, to regulate what can and cannot be labelled and sold as flushable.

Therefore in conclusion the IWSFG, in conjunction with other water and wastewater associations and municipal groups from around the world and within Canada, commit to:

- Establishing clear, sustainable global specifications on flushability that can be used by standard bodies or others within each country;
- Supporting organizations in the implementation phases of any agreed flushability specifications;
- Creating an awareness of the IWSFG objectives among non-member water/wastewater service groups;
- Seeking the collaboration of other stakeholders to protect wastewater services, infrastructure, receiving waters and the environment from flushable products

The Town of Cobourg's Environmental Services Staff recommends the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding to support the objectives of the IWSFG in addressing the impacts of flushable products on the Town's wastewater infrastructure.



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