



# Cigarette Butt Litter: The Facts

**Why cigarette butts?** Cigarette butts are the most littered item in America, and it is not just the inconsiderate who are contributing to this problem: research has shown that many people who would never litter a fast food wrapper or pop bottle will drop a cigarette butt to the ground without thinking twice.

**Why now?** It is estimated that there are over 1.2 billion smokers worldwide who purchase and use over 5 trillion cigarettes each year, or 105 billion cigarettes per week. Of the cigarettes sold, 99% are smoked outdoors, which results in trillions of cigarette butts being littered each year, at a rate of approximately 2.3 million butts littered per minute. As more restaurants and public buildings become smoke-free areas, this number will only increase as smokers move outdoors to light up.

**What makes cigarette butts so dangerous?** Contrary to popular belief, cigarettes are NOT biodegradable; in fact, they are made of cellulose acetate tow, a type of plastic that can take more than a decade to decompose within the environment. Cigarette butts also contain a cocktail of hazardous chemicals and toxins which may leak from the cigarette as it begins to break down. Furthermore, cigarette butts can be mistaken as food by animals, fish, and small children, and smoldering cigarette butts are often the cause of devastating wildfires.

When cigarette butts and other smoking paraphernalia such as matches and packaging material are dropped outside, wind and rain can wash these items into storm drains that lead directly to rivers and lakes. A comprehensive study done by the Clean Virginia Waterways Coalition found cigarette filters in the stomachs of birds, fish, and other marine creatures. The study also found that a single cigarette butt in approximately two gallons of water is lethal to water fleas, a tiny crustacean that is found in both fresh and salt water and is a crucial link in the marine food chain. Even when a cigarette butt does not actually make it to a water source, it can still contaminate aquatic ecosystems with tar, nicotine, and other potentially lethal toxins that leak into rain water as it flows over cigarette litter on its way to a body of water.

**How does this affect me?** Rivers are fragile ecosystems that are easily affected by human activities. In the Red River Valley, any water and litter that goes down a storm drain in the street goes directly to the Red River, not to a waste water treatment facility. Because cigarette butts are light, they typically become buoyant in rain water and are easily washed into storm drains. Since storm water is not treated before entering the Red River, the butt itself and any leaking chemicals and toxins are deposited directly into the water. Fargo-Moorhead gets about 90% of our drinking water from the Red River.

**What can I do to help?** If you are a smoker, make a conscious effort to stop littering cigarette butts and other smoking paraphernalia. Whether you use the ashtray in your vehicle while driving or walk to a trashcan when smoking outdoors, avoid littering your cigarette on the street or sidewalks. Many stores and online sites now offer personal ashtrays, heat-resistant pouches made to hold cigarette butts in your purse or pocket

Even if you are not a smoker, you can help. Educate any smokers you know on the dangers of cigarette litter. The number one reason smokers litter cigarette butts is that they are not aware of the harmful effects this litter can have on the environment. Perhaps the easiest and best way to help is simply by speaking out if you see someone litter a cigarette or any other material: politely ask him or her to please avoid littering and offer to point out the nearest trashcan or ashtray.

---

#### **Sources Used:**

“Cigarette Litter and How it Affects Us” by Terry Martin of About.com at [quitsmoking.about.com](http://quitsmoking.about.com)  
“Education” and “Facts” on [cigarettelitter.org](http://cigarettelitter.org)  
Keep America Beautiful Cigarette Litter Page at [kab.org](http://kab.org)  
Surfrider Foundation Online at [surfridersd.org/hotyb.php](http://surfridersd.org/hotyb.php)

#### **For More Information, Contact:**

River Keepers  
325 7th St. S. Ste 201  
Fargo, ND 58103-1846  
701-235-2895  
[info@riverkeepers.org](mailto:info@riverkeepers.org)  
[www.riverkeepers.org](http://www.riverkeepers.org)