

Flushable wipes industry: We are not causing sewage problem

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Flushable wipe manufacturers say they are not to blame for clogged water treatment plants and are willing to put their money behind a push to educate consumers about it.

Dave Rousse, president of the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, said the city's push to pass legislation that would prohibit manufacturers from marketing their wipes as "flushable" will do nothing to address the problem.

Instead, Rousse said his association is willing to partner with the city to better educate the public about what exactly flushable means.

"My members would be willing to financially support a public campaign which raises the awareness," Rousse told POLITICO New York. "Right now all of our resources are spent trying to correct the misconception that DEP has created by saying that the problems are caused by flushable wipes."

According to research conducted by the group, only 7 percent of wipes are made and marketed to be flush friendly. Before they are allowed to carry the flushable label, the wipe manufacturers must first pass a series of tests to ensure the materials in their products are dissoluble in water.

Rousse said it's the other 93 percent that's causing the problem.

"When we did forensic analysis we find that 93 percent of the stuff that gets collected on screens in these systems has nothing to do with flushable wipes," Rousse said.

The majority of wipes, include surface cleaning and baby wipes as well as feminine hygiene products, are made of materials designed to prevent easy ripping when used.

"The flushable wipes are made from unique cellulosic materials, not plastics — the fabrics are bound together so that they hold their strength to the point of use but then they release that strength when exposed to the toilet, the flushing and the waste water treatment system," Rousse told POLITICO New York.

In the last five years the city has spent millions of dollars to fix equipment problems related to wipes that get caught in screening machines throughout the system.

Amy Spitalnick, a spokeswoman for Mayor Bill de Blasio, said the city continues to spend millions in order to clear wipes out of water treatment infrastructure and will continue to move ahead with the push to prohibit marketing unflushable products as flushable.

"That fact alone — and extensive studies — make clear that many of these wipes are indeed indestructible," Spitalnick said. "That's why we are working with the Council and the industry on a path forward that protects our infrastructure and our environment."

Despite that, Rousse said money should also be spent in raising awareness among customers, similarly to what cities had to do before recycling became a widely adopted practice.

"We don't want to blame the consumer. We believe they will do the right thing if they know what the right thing to do is. This is such a small issue in the minds of consumers — they think if it goes down the toilet it is therefore flushable," Rousse said.

The industry is instead suggesting that wipes that are not designed to break apart in water carry a "do not flush" sign in their packaging to warn consumers about the danger of flushing them.

"That is our solution to the problem — a signal to the consumer to not flush but also some consumer education about the sensitivity of the water treatment infrastructure," Rousse said. "This bill regulates the flushable wipes and ignores the non-flushable wipes."

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