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North Carolina -- First in Butts!

By Kristan Cockerill

What is a little more than an inch long and poses a significant threat to the environment?

Clue: Some of you produce about 3.75 pounds of these items each year.

The answer is cigarette butts. Across the United States more than 170 million pounds of butts are generated each year, and estimates are that about half of these end up as litter. Butts are by far the most common item found in litter clean ups.

Many smokers believe that butts are too small to count as litter and that they are made from paper that degrades quickly. Both are false. Although they are little, tossed butts pack a powerful impact.

Flicked lit butts routinely start fires that destroy habitat – both human and animal. As many regions, including the Southeast, suffer from drought, this threat is quite serious.

Animals mistake butts for food and eat them. This can lead to malnutrition and starvation when the butts block an intestinal tract. Butts can make the animal feel full, and it will not eat its normal food.

Perhaps the most insidious effect from butts is their negative impact on water quality. No matter where they are dropped, wind and rain transport butts into local waterways. Most filters are made of cellulose acetate, which is a form of plastic that takes years to breakdown, but within an hour of coming into contact with water a cigarette butt begins to leach chemicals including cadmium, arsenic, and lead. A single cigarette butt can impair two gallons of water. Imagine what pounds of butts can do.

Once in the water, these chemicals harm the organisms that live in the stream. This pollution also has potentially serious consequences for people. Here in the High Country we are facing water supply challenges. Any degradation in the quality of our water further reduces our potential supply and increases the cost of treating water for human consumption.

Interestingly, measures designed to protect people from the effects of cigarette smoke by banning indoor smoking likely increase the number of butts that end up as litter. Rather than putting their butts in an ashtray on a restaurant table, smokers drop the butts on a sidewalk.

Paying attention to cigarette butts is especially important in North Carolina where according to the Centers for Disease Control almost 23 percent of adults smoke. This is higher than the national average of 21 percent. More butts are produced in the Tar Heel state than in most other places! If you smoke, please be responsible with your butts.

For more information, go to Cigarette Butt Litter or LitterButt at

<http://www.longwood.edu/cleanva/cigarettelitterhome.html>

or

<http://www.litterbutt.com>