

If You Drive a Car—Read This!

by Penny LeGate

It's funny how the simplest activity can be very harmful to our environment. And the perpetrator may not even be aware that he or she is doing something bad! Did you know every time you wash your car at home, you are hurting Puget Sound? Your vehicle might be left sparkling, but all the oil, toxic metals, dirt and grime that are washed away with the soapy water end up in whatever stream, lake, or creek is closest to your home.

As the contaminated runoff flows to the Sound, it hurts fish and other aquatic life all along the way. But Vic Odermat is hoping to change that, one wash at a time. Vic is the owner of Brown Bear Car Wash, a company that now boasts 18 tunnel car washes and 15 self-serve locations sprinkled around the Seattle area (four in Spokane, too). He just re-acquired control of the family business after leasing it for several years, and is now in the process of, in his words, "getting the company back to where it was in 1995." Odermat says he gave up control to TOSCO because they convinced him they could provide "more opportunities to his employees than he could ever dream of." But in new hands, Brown Bear eventually got lost somewhere in the corporate world of acquisitions, mergers and bottom lines. So, in September 2003, Vic Odermat took his company back.

He's now facing the "chore of putting humpty dumpty back together again." According to Odermat, Brown Bear employees had lost their pride in the business, lost their concern for customer service. He is proud of the fact that since he re-claimed the helm, 15-20 of his top people have returned to work for him. Odermat says many of his workers started with Brown Bear when they were 15—now they're 50! Odermat's philosophy: "We look after our employees and they look after me." But it doesn't stop there. Odermat's carwashes are helping to solve the contaminated runoff problem by pre-treating the effluent on site and then discharging the water directly to the sanitary sewer system for further treatment. Several of his car washes even recycle water.

"We are very cognizant of water resources and the limitations of our fresh water supply," says Odermat thoughtfully. "We are constantly evaluating ways to

conserve water and recycle more." In the near future, Brown Bear plans to open a new car wash on the Sammamish plateau that will test a brand new water reclamation system.

Odermat grew to love the outdoors during his formative years, growing up in Anchorage, Alaska. It was a time, he says, "when there were no paved streets, just boardwalks." He developed a special appreciation for the abundant birdlife, mammals and fish. "When I lived there," Odermat recalls, "the salmon runs were so heavy, the creeks filled up with fish and the top layer was out of the water!" Odermat explains that he wants to help preserve a rich and diverse environment for his own family, which includes children, Lance and Susan. Lance now serves as the in-house company attorney for Brown Bear and says he's "learning the business from dad." Daughter Susan is peripherally involved in public relations and advertising, and wife Mary (who happens to be the mayor of Medina) is what Vic refers to as his "special consultant." Odermat says he supports organizations such as the Puget Soundkeeper Alliance because he knows we are capable of making a difference. Vic Odermat wants to make sure others are aware of what he knows to be true – take care of what's around you, and it will take care of you.

Pollution Prevention Tip: Next time you pull in to a charity car wash, hand them \$10 to support their cause and drive on down the street to a commercial car wash where waste water is prevented from entering the storm drains.