Biodegradable Metalworking Fluids

Misconceptions About Biodegradability

Many metalworking fluid manufacturers are offering “Biodegradable” products perceiving the notion that they will biodegrade and are easily disposed of down-the-drain.

Although biodegradable fluids may offer reduced long-term environmental persistence, it is important to recognise that used metalworking fluids cannot be disposed of through drains or municipal waste systems. Once they have been used in machining operations, these fluids can become contaminated with hazardous substances and must be handled in compliance with industrial waste regulations.

Improper disposal can result in:

- Environmental contamination
- Violation of federal, state and local regulations
- Legal and financial liabilities
- Operational disruptions to wastewater treatment systems

Risks of Improper Disposal

As previously noted, once the metalworking fluid is introduced to a machining system, the fluid composition and waste profile can change due to several potential contaminants. The fluid could be classified as hazardous waste posing the risk of causing:

- Wastewater Limitations – Municipal treatment systems are not designed to process industrial contaminants.
- Ecological Harm – Fluids entering storm drains flow untreated into waterways, posing risks to aquatic ecosystems.
- Infrastructure Impact – Industrial fluids can disrupt biological treatment processes and cause blockages.
- Regulatory Prohibition – Regulations explicitly prohibit disposal through drains, storm systems or general refuse.

Approved Disposal Practices

- Consult Local Authorities: Obtain guidance on regional disposal requirements.
- Engage Licensed Waste Management Services: Utilise professional services for treatment, recycling or decontamination.
- On-Site Treatment (if permitted): Some providers can assist with oil separation and controlled discharge of treated aqueous portions.
- Consider fluid recycling to limit disposal. Centrifuges, coalescers and filtration can lengthen the life of the fluid. Master Fluid Solutions offers a variety of options to assist with keeping your metalworking fluid in-use longer.

Note: The biodegradability of the base fluid does not eliminate the hazardous nature of the fluid once used in manufacturing.

Conditions That May Classify Used Fluids as Hazardous

- Chlorinated Compounds – From additives or maintenance products
- Heavy Metals – Including lead, chromium, mercury, cadmium, arsenic and silver
- Tramp Oils – Hydraulic or gear oil contamination
- Microbial Contamination – Excessive bacterial or fungal activity
- Metal Particulates – Fines and chips suspended in the fluid
- Solvents and Degreasers – From cleaning operations
- Carcinogenic Compounds – Such as nitrosamines

Determining Hazardous Status

- Review Safety Data Sheets (SDS): Section 3 – Composition/Information details the chemical’s hazardous components.
- Evaluate Contamination Sources: Consider process-derived contaminants
- Consult with the Manufacturer: Contact supplier/manufacturer for more details
- Discuss with your local waste hauler to generate a profile that accurately classifies your waste

Indicators of Fluid Deterioration

- Visual Changes – Grey/black colouration (bacteria), brown/yellow tint (tramp oil).
- Odour – Rancid or foul smell indicating microbial activity.

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- Surface Conditions – Biofilm, slime or tramp oil layers.
- Operational Issues – Foaming, excessive deposits or swarf accumulation.

Escalation to Professional Waste Management

If fluid conditions do not meet operational requirements, or if hazardous contaminants are suspected, contact a licensed industrial waste service provider for proper classification and disposal.

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