

What Is A Watershed



For local information, contact

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Keeping Wisconsin's lakes clean demands more than dockside diligence. Even if you don't live on the lakeshore you may be contributing to the pollution of lakes and streams. A lake is larger than its shoreline. It's part of a larger system — a watershed.

What Is A Watershed?

Water from rainfall or snowmelt that doesn't evaporate or soak into the soil runs into ditches, streams, wetlands or lakes. The land area where the water drains from is a watershed.

Watersheds vary in size. If water from a few acres drains into a little stream, those few acres are its watershed. This stream and others like it run into larger streams or into lakes. Therefore, small watersheds make up larger ones. It's easy to see how the watersheds of Wisconsin's lakes can have land areas many times larger than their lake surfaces!

How Do You Fit Into Your Watershed?

Wherever you live in Wisconsin you are in a watershed. Your watershed may be covered with towns, suburban development, industrial plants or farmland. Any excess nutrients, sediments and pollutants in your watershed are

carried by stormwater runoff into lakes and streams. You and all the other people who live in the watershed potentially influence the water quality in nearby streams and lakes depending on how careful you are in your day-to-day activities.

Understanding that activities on land affect water quality should lead you to cast a critical eye on many common activities such as gardening, lawn care, automotive maintenance, and farming. These and many other activities can contribute excess nutrients, sediment and pollutants to lakes and streams in your watershed.

What Are The Results Of Human Activity In Your Watershed?

The by-products of our activities can degrade nearby waters when we're not careful. Excess nutrients increase algae and weed growth. Sediments carry nutrients and may also cloud the receiving water, resulting in increased turbidity that can harm fish populations and make the water less pleasant for recreation. Pollutants carried from the watershed can harm fish and plant life in lakes and streams. In some situations these pollutants contaminate well water and other drinking water sources.

What Can You Do For Your Watershed?

You can:

- adopt practices that slow the flow of water over your property to minimize erosion;
- reduce excess nutrients that could wash off your land;
- collect waste oil and other automotive wastes to be recycled rather than letting them run into the ground.

What Practices Reduce Runoff?

In rural areas you can adopt:

- Contour farming
- Conservation tillage
- Delaying tillage and fertilizing until spring
- Rotating crops
- Strip-cropping
- Terracing
- Diversion "channels"
- Grassed waterways
- Filter strips for runoff from animal lots
- Retiring highly erodible cropland
- Practicing sound pesticide and fertilizer use

In urban and suburban areas you can:

- Maintain plant cover or a tree canopy to reduce erosion
- Mulch gardens and exposed soil
- Terrace land to slow runoff
- Direct runoff from rooftop downspouts to areas where it can soak into the soil
- Minimize paved and impermeable surfaces
- Avoid overloading banks or steep slopes
- Minimize soil disturbance during construction
- Maintain natural vegetation or plant vegetation to form a buffer zone along the water's edge
- Maintain septic systems
- Use low- or no-phosphate soaps and detergents

