

What's a Watershed?



You are part of a watershed. This means that everything you do can affect nearby surface water and groundwater, for better or worse. Your watershed is a geographical community that includes all the humans, plants, and animals that live in it and all nonliving parts, such as rocks and soil. As China's Emperor Yu understood long ago, whatever happens upstream in a watershed affects everything downstream. To improve the water quality of a stream, look at the whole area, including where it drains. Anything dumped on the ground in the watershed can end up in any of its bodies of water just like anything released into the air can come down again, nearby or thousands of miles away. We must remember, we all live downstream in our own watershed or downstream from someone else's.

Think about this: Most of us drink water from our local watershed. Although some people get water from elsewhere (Los Angeles gets water from distant mountains, for example), most of us get it from a local well or a nearby lake or river. It may come directly from a private well, but more often it comes through a government water department or utility. Typically, the utility draws water from a nearby source, treats or cleans it, then pipes it to homes, schools, and businesses.

After water is used, it goes down the drain, to a private septic system or through the sewer or a wastewater treatment plant. There it is treated, or cleaned, before it is sent back into local lakes, oceans, or rivers. You can help yourself and the public utilities by using less water and by keeping pollutants out of wastewater. You'll also help reduce the money your family pays for water and sewer service.