



“Allegheny River” by Elizabeth C. Iannone
Bellaitaliana's Photography

Pennsylvania's Watersheds and You

Have you ever taken a sip of water from a fountain and you thought ‘yuck’? Do you take for granted clean running water coming out of the faucet as you shower every morning? Do you appreciate being able to swim or fish in your favorite lake every summer? The quality of water in Pennsylvania is a primary environmental problem our state faces. Individually, each Pennsylvania citizen can have an impact on the health of our waters. Why is the quality of our water so important? Polluted water impacts our quality of life, economy and hampers your local municipality’s ability to comply with federal and state laws. Poor water quality detracts from enjoyable recreational opportunities, mars the appearance of our waterways, hurts business and tourism, and poses a threat to the public health. Local communities are forced to allocate valuable dollars away from other necessary projects to remediate water pollution problems that in many cases are preventable with proactive measures.

To comply with local and federal regulations to reduce stormwater pollution, public works officials are checking stormwater facilities to make sure they are operating correctly and are also conducting screenings of locations to check for contamination where stormwater is discharged. Officials are also helping to increase public awareness regarding the problems of stormwater pollution by publishing articles like this one, distributing pamphlets, and posting information on municipal web sites. Your municipality may also be promoting several public involvement activities such as distributing of rain barrels, encouraging citizens to design rain gardens on their properties, coordinating public meetings to raise awareness of the problem, implementing educational programs for youngsters, and organizing recycling and clean up days. On an individual level, your personal choices can also help reduce nonpoint source pollution. Remember, we all have an impact on Pennsylvania’s watersheds.

Water Pollution Terminology: The Basics

- **Watershed:** A watershed is the point to which all the land drains. Pennsylvania is divided up into six water basins, with these basins further segmented into over 100 watersheds.
- **Pre-Development Water Balance:** On untouched and undeveloped land, rain water is able to soak into the ground or be absorbed by vegetation, thus storing the water in the watershed for later use. The vegetation also helps filter any pollutants from the water that runs off the land.
- **Post-Development Water Balance:** With current development practices, most water is forced to runoff and move downstream rapidly, leaving little in the watershed for groundwater recharge, drinking water supplies or other uses. As water flows over land, it collects any contaminants on the land; this polluted runoff can run directly to our streams and lakes and increase the risk of downstream flooding.
- **Point Source Pollution:** Point source pollution comes from a single, identifiable source, such as industrial plants or sewage treatment plants.
- **Nonpoint Source Pollution:** We all contribute to this type of pollution. The main residential non-source pollutants are: chemicals, nutrients from fertilizers, and pathogens from failed septic systems or pets.