

Indian River County
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Your Watershed Connection

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Quick. What is a watershed?

If you answered an area of land that drains water, sediment, and dissolved material into a common body of water, then pat yourself on the back. But there is more to a watershed than just a definition. Watersheds come in all shapes and sizes and are not bound by county borders. So, you are always part of a watershed.

Although the definition of a watershed may be simple, it is made up of many different components. These components include lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, lagoons, groundwater, and the surrounding lands from which the water drains. As the water drains off the land, some of it soaks into the ground, replenishing the groundwater. The remaining amount flows over the surface and finds its way to the nearest water body, like a stream or pond. This stream can then carry the water to a river, which eventually flows into the ocean.

In addition to these natural areas, the watersheds we live in also include man-made waterways called canals. Their major function is to drain water, which frees up thousands of acres of land for residences, businesses, and agriculture. In addition, canals provide flood control, navigation, and recreation. Without canals, Florida would not be able to accommodate the millions of residents, businesses, and agricultural fields that are south of Orlando. These canals increase the amount of water that drains from the land and transport it into a water body, such as the Indian River Lagoon.

As our watersheds include more urban and suburban areas, water quality can be negatively impacted by nonpoint source pollution. As water flows over parking lots, construction sites, lawns, and agricultural areas, pollutants such as fertilizers, pesticides, and soil are picked up. Unlike the water we use in our homes, this water is untreated.

When these pollutants reach a water body, our marine resources are affected. Extra soil and unwanted sediment muddy the water and clog fish gills. It also decreases the amount of light reaching seagrass beds and smothers other organisms that live on the bottom. Excess nutrients from fertilizers cause algal blooms, which then block light to seagrass beds, and decrease the amount of dissolved oxygen available to fish. Toxins, such as pesticides and other chemicals found in the stormwater runoff, can result in fish kills and poison aquatic plants, which can endanger the health of Florida's water resources.

We all need to be stewards of the watershed because whatever we do to our land affects the water that passes through it. Here are some simple measures that you can do to help make the water leaving your area of the watershed cleaner.

- Do not dump trash in the canals.
- Pick up after your dog.
- Collect and use rainwater to irrigate plants.
- Use environmentally friendly pesticides such as horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps.
- Leave lawn clipping on your lawn so that nutrients in the clippings are recycled.
- Use a slow release fertilizer.
- Plant groundcover or use mulch on thinly vegetated areas to decrease erosion.
- Properly dispose of toxic substances like paint, paint thinner, automobile fluids, and cleaning products.

If you would like to learn more about how you can help reduce your impact on our watersheds, please contact your local County Extension Service for more information.