LAWN TO LAKE

What's in Your Watershed?

What is a Watershed?

No matter where you live, you live in a watershed. A watershed is the area of land that drains to a specific waterbody whether it is a lake, stream or even wetland. You may not live next to a stream or a lake but eventually the precipitation that falls on the land surrounding your home will drain to nearby waters. Watersheds are separated from other watersheds by high land points such as hills and slopes. Watersheds are everywhere.

The watershed of Lake Michigan includes all the land that drains into streams, rivers and ditches that empty into the lake. It is composed on many watersheds (Figure 1). Even your property and your local shopping mall play a role in adding water to the lake. For example, Sunset Park in Valparaiso, Ind. is part of the Salt Creek Watershed a subwatershed of the Lake Michigan watershed (Figure 2). Any precipitation that falls on the land at the park is eventually carried into Salt Creek and ultimately into Lake Michigan. And, as the rain runs off the land, it can pick up pollutants in the watershed, including trash, oils, fertilizers and pesticides.

Lake Michigan Watersheds: Northwest Indiana

In northwest Indiana, there are six coastal watersheds that have a direct impact on the water quality and quantity of Lake Michigan. The six waterheds include: Salt Creek; East Branch-Little Calumet River; Deep River/Burns Waterway; Calumet River-Frontal Lake Michigan; Trail Creek; and Galena River. For more information about the six watersheds visit the Lake Michigan Coastal Program website at http://www.in.gov/dnr/lakemich/6084.htm. Learn about who is managing your watershed and find out why your watershed is important to northwest Indiana.

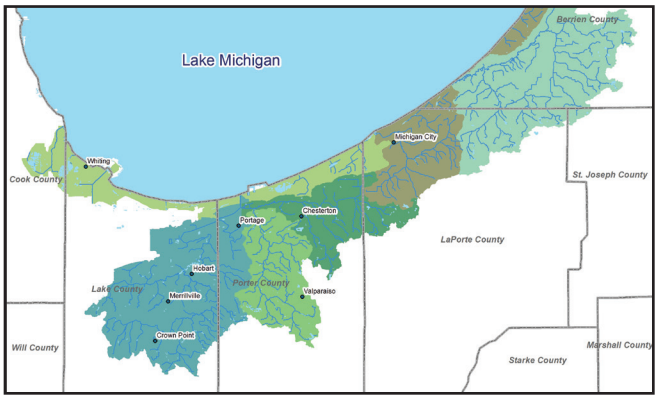

Figure 1. Lake Michigan Watershed and its corresponding subwatersheds in northwest Indiana

How Can I Protect My Watershed?

Under natural conditions, deep-rooted native plants help rain soak into the ground. Unfortunately, with more urbanization, vegetated surfaces are being replaced with hard surfaces. When water falls on an impervious surface, it runs quickly off and is not soaked up by the soil. Water running off the land picks up pollutants and is referred to as stormwater runoff.

Figure 2. Salt Creek Watershed

As the land become more urban, there are fewer natural vegetative surfaces available for water absorption. However, we do have managed lawns and landscapes. As a homeowner, you can help protect your watershed by reducing the use of fertilizers and pesticides on your lawn. For example, excess phosphorous may end up in the surrounding waterways. Extra phosphorous in the water results in

increased in algal growth. Excessive algal growth can degrade the health of the waterbody by forming large and dense blooms. These blooms alter habitat quality through overgrowth, shading, oxygen depletion, and possible accumulation on beaches. Adverse effects are seen in degraded lake bottom habitats, nearshore lake vegetation, and organisms inhabiting the bottom.

How to Reduce Nutrient Input to Your Watershed

1. Keep leaves and lawn clippings out of the streets and the gutters.
2. Test your soil to determine if you need to apply phosphorous. Most soils are not phosphorous limited and a simple soil test may save you money in the future.
3. Learn to read fertilizer bags. For example, the middle number on the fertilizer bag represents phosphorous.
4. Control soil erosion around your home. When it rains, water moving over the soil picks up particles that have phosphorous attached to them. The soil particles eventually end up in the lake and phosphorous will promote algal growth.

We all live in a watershed!

Resources

- Indiana Lake Michigan Coastal Program watershed factsheets
  http://www.in.gov/dnr/lakemich
- Lawn to Lake, natural lawn care tips:
  http://www.lawntolake.org
- University of Illinois Extension, lawn care information for northern Illinois
  http://urbanext.illinois.edu/lawntalk

Great Lakes RESTORATION