

The Watershed Ethic

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No matter if we live in an apartment, a house, in the city, in a suburb, on a farm, or an acreage we all live in a watershed. A watershed is all the land that drains runoff rainfall, snow melt or irrigation to a specific stream, creek, lake or river. We can live miles away from a stream, creek, pond, lake or river but we still live in a watershed.

Watersheds can be small or large. Let's compare a watershed to our home or farmstead. Do we only care what happens in the basement and not to any other room in the home or in the yard? Do we care only about our house and neglect the other buildings on the farmstead? If we have damage to the driveway does that impact the entire home or farmstead? Yes, it has an impact on the appearance of the home and the value of the home and lot or access to the farmstead. What if we have damage to the carpet in the family room or the barn roof? That impacts the entire property. Or water damage in the basement? Or a brown spot in the lawn? Or broken down corrals? We can't separate out a particular room or area from the entire home or farmstead. We care about the well being of our entire home and farmstead.

The same is true about a watershed. If we have pollutants running off farm fields, construction sites, lawns, yards, sidewalks and driveways, parking lots, and streets, they all impact the watershed and its specific water body. We can't separate out any specific area in a watershed. What happens at each one of our homes, farmsteads or fields has an impact on the entire watershed and the specific creek, stream, lake or river that it drains too. We have to care about the entire watershed.

It is a principle of watershed science that each of us is personally responsible for contributing some of the pollutants that run off our farmsteads, farm fields, lawns, driveways, streets, and parking lots. Runoff pollution is the major cause of water quality problems in most watersheds. Since in a watershed the land drains to its lowest point, runoff water picks up pollutants and carries them away to our creeks, streams, lakes and rivers. Therefore no matter where we live in the watershed we have a responsibility of preventing runoff pollution from leaving our property and being carried to a water body.

A watershed ethic means that we care what happens on our property and the impact it has in the watershed. Having a watershed ethic means that each person is willing to make some changes in their behaviors and practices to minimize their collective impact on the watershed. Such a watershed ethic is critical if we are to protect and improve the quality of our watersheds.