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Soil Conservation Service

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What Is a Watershed?

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What Is a Watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that drains water to a given point.

To see how a watershed works, all you have to do is look at your kitchen sink. The drainboard that carries the rinse water into the sink functions on the same principle as a watershed.

Small watersheds sustain large ones. In small watersheds, water from a few acres of land drains into small streams. These small streams flow into larger streams. The land drained by these small streams makes up the larger streams' watershed.

Watersheds and you

You are always in a watershed. Consequently, the things that you do on your land affect the larger watershed

downstream. Unchecked water that runs off your land can cut gullies and carry away topsoil. This displaced topsoil, with other debris, can enter streams, lakes, and reservoirs, where it:

- Reduces their holding capacity;
- Increases the cost of water filtration;
- Interferes with hydroelectric plants; and
- Spoils their recreational value.

Too much water running off the land too rapidly can:

- Take lives;
- Destroy property;
- Cause floods; and
- Choke off streams with sediment.



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Conservation practices for watersheds

Agriculture can benefit from soil and water conservation practices and flood-prevention measures established for a watershed. To conserve water for crops, pasture, and range, the following practices can be used to slow water down as it drains a watershed:

- Conservation tillage;
- Terracing;
- Stripcropping;
- Planting more grass and legumes in crop rotations;
- Improving pastures to make more water soak into the soil;
- Using small dams to hold back runoff water; and
- Using conservation irrigation systems that waste less water.

For more details about watersheds, contact your local Soil Conservation Service office.

All programs and services of the Soil Conservation Service are offered on a nondiscriminatory basis, without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, marital status, or handicap.

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