

Protecting Water Quality *from* URBAN RUNOFF

Clean Water is Everybody's Business

In urban and suburban areas, much of the land surface is covered by buildings and pavement, which do not allow rain and snowmelt to soak into the ground. Instead, most developed areas rely on storm drains to carry large amounts of runoff from roofs and paved areas to nearby waterways. The stormwater runoff may carry pollutants such as oil, dirt, chemicals, and lawn fertilizers directly to streams and rivers, where they can seriously harm water quality.

How Urbanized Areas Affect Water Quality

Increased Runoff

The porous and varied terrain of natural landscapes like forests, wetlands, and grasslands traps rainwater and snowmelt and allows them to filter slowly into

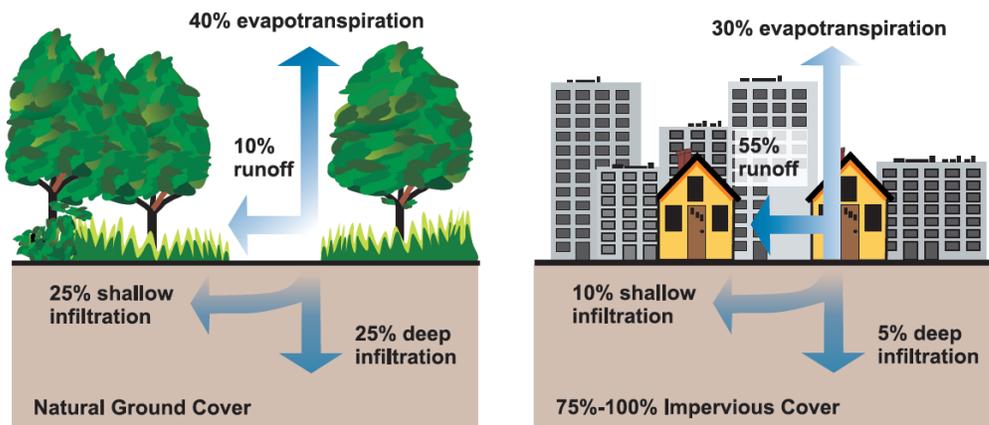
The most recent National Water Quality Inventory reports that runoff from urbanized areas is the leading source of water quality impairments to surveyed estuaries and the third-largest source of impairments to surveyed lakes.

Did you know that because of impervious surfaces like pavement and rooftops, a typical city block generates more than 5 times more runoff than a woodland area of the same size?

the ground. In contrast, impervious (nonporous) surfaces like roads, parking lots, and rooftops prevent rain and snowmelt from infiltrating, or soaking, into the ground. Most of the rainfall and snowmelt remains above the surface, where it runs off rapidly in unnaturally large amounts.

Storm sewer systems concentrate runoff into smooth, straight conduits. This runoff gathers speed and erosional power as it travels underground.

When this runoff leaves the storm drains and empties into a stream, its excessive volume and power blast out streambanks, damaging streamside vegetation and wiping out aquatic habitat. These increased storm flows carry sediment loads from construction sites and other denuded surfaces and eroded streambanks. They often carry higher water temperatures from streets, roof tops, and parking lots, which are harmful to the health and reproduction of aquatic life.



Relationship between impervious cover and surface runoff. Impervious cover in a watershed results in increased surface runoff. As little as 10 percent impervious cover in a watershed can result in stream degradation.

The loss of infiltration from urbanization may also cause profound groundwater changes. Although urbanization leads to great increases in flooding during and immediately after wet weather, in many instances it results in lower stream flows during dry weather. Many native fish and other aquatic life cannot survive when these conditions prevail.

Increased Pollutant Loads

Urbanization increases the variety and amount of pollutants carried into streams, rivers, and lakes. The pollutants include:

- Sediment
- Oil, grease, and toxic chemicals from motor vehicles
- Pesticides and nutrients from lawns and gardens
- Viruses, bacteria, and nutrients from pet waste and failing septic systems
- Road salts
- Heavy metals from roof shingles, motor vehicles, and other sources
- Thermal pollution from dark impervious surfaces such as streets and rooftops

These pollutants can harm fish and wildlife populations, kill

native vegetation, foul drinking water supplies, and make recreational areas unsafe and unpleasant.

Managing Urban Runoff

What Homeowners Can Do

To decrease polluted runoff from paved surfaces, households can develop alternatives to areas traditionally covered by impervious surfaces. Porous pavement materials are available for driveways and sidewalks, and native vegetation and mulch can replace high maintenance grass lawns. Homeowners can use fertilizers sparingly and sweep driveways, sidewalks, and roads instead of using a hose. Instead of disposing of yard waste, they can use the materials to start a compost pile. And homeowners

can learn to use Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to reduce dependence on harmful pesticides.

In addition, households can prevent polluted runoff by picking up after pets and using, storing, and disposing of household chemicals properly. Drivers should check their cars for leaks and recycle their motor oil and antifreeze when these fluids are changed. Drivers can also avoid impacts from car wash runoff (e.g., detergents, grime, etc.) by using car wash facilities that do not generate runoff. Households served by septic systems should have them professionally inspected and pumped every 3 to 5 years. They should also practice water conservation measures to extend the life of their septic systems.



USE LAWN CHEMICALS WISELY.

Pesticides and fertilizers applied incorrectly or excessively get washed from yards and gardens into our rivers and streams.

For More Information

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