SOUTHWEST FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Living in Florida's Watersheds

Southwest Florida
Water Management District

You Live in a Watershed

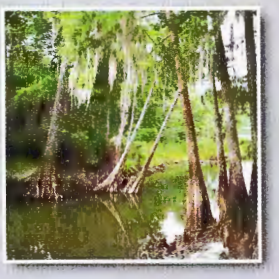
Everyone lives, works and plays in a watershed and everyone in your watershed is part of the watershed community. The animals, fish and plants are too. You influence what happens in your watershed, good or bad, by how you treat the natural resources — water, soil, air, plants and animals. And your actions in your small watershed affect the larger watershed downstream.

But what exactly is a watershed? Why are watersheds important? And what can we do to protect or improve the health of the watersheds in which we live?

A watershed is an area of land that water flows across as it moves toward a common body of water, such as a stream, lake or coast. Water within a specific watershed will move across the higher land toward the lowest point within the area. Florida does not have dramatic changes in land elevation, so watershed boundaries are not easy to recognize and water often moves very slowly through our swamps and wetlands.

Watersheds can be very large, draining thousands of square miles to a major body of water, or very small, draining a few acres to a small pond. Watersheds may contain open fields, forests and wetlands, as well as cities, suburbs and agricultural lands.

Large watersheds are usually made up of smaller sub-watersheds. For example, the Tampa Bay watershed drains 2,200 square miles and contains over 100 tidal creeks and four major rivers. Within this watershed, each river is an individual watershed that drains its surrounding area and contains numerous smaller tributaries.



The District includes roughly 10,000 square miles in all or part of 16 counties in west-central Florida, extending north to Levy County, south to Charlotte County, and inland to Polk and Highlands counties. Within these boundaries,

Typical Watershed

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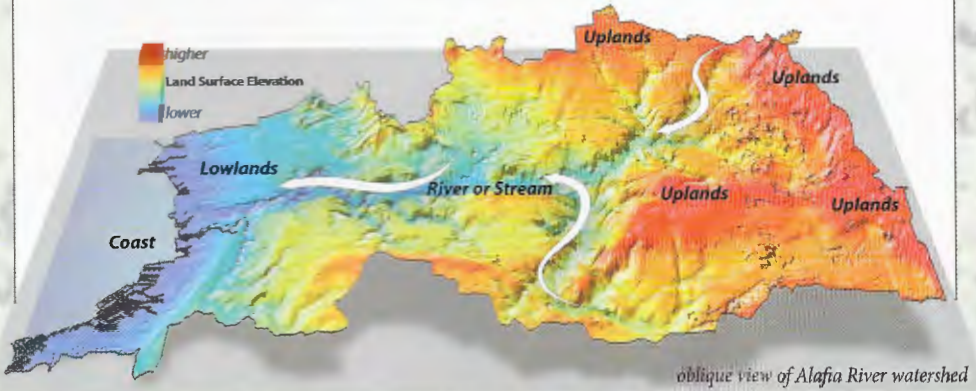


oblique view of Alafia River watershed

Protecting Florida's Watersheds

11 primary watersheds have been identified for the Watershed Management Program (see back cover). These 11 watersheds contain more than 400 smaller sub-watersheds.

Watersheds provide water for drinking, irrigation, agriculture, industry, boating, fishing and swimming. Wildlife also need healthy watersheds for food and shelter. Healthy watersheds are vital for a healthy environment and economy.

Many people know that dumping garbage, spilling oil or discharging raw sewage into a river or lake is harmful to a watershed. These are examples of point-source pollution, meaning that pollution is caused by one easily identifiable source located anywhere within a watershed. Point-source pollution is the easiest for residents to recognize and take action to reduce.

A less recognizable, but just as harmful, type of pollution is called nonpoint-source pollution. This type of pollution comes from a variety of sources throughout a watershed, making it harder to identify and more difficult to reduce. Stormwater runoff is a major contributor of nonpoint-source pollution. Stormwater runoff is rainwater that flows across the land, picking up pollutants and eventually washing them into water bodies.

Some very common actions such as using more fertilizers and pesticides than a lawn needs can result in pollution as stormwater runoff transports the excess nutrients to water bodies. A person who would never pour motor oil directly into a lake might dispose of it into a storm drain, not realizing that the oil will eventually be flushed into the lake with the storm water.

Ground water (water in porous rock and sand under the land surface) can also become contaminated by lawn fertilizers or leaky septic systems leaching into the ground. This tainted ground water is often pushed back to the surface through springs and vents, polluting the surface water bodies they feed.

We can reduce the amount of nonpoint-source pollution that enters a watershed by simple actions such as using Florida-friendly landscaping to reduce fertilizer and pesticides, inspecting and maintaining septic tanks regularly, picking up pet waste and protecting storm drains from chemicals.

How You Can Help Protect Our Watersheds

By following these five simple steps, you can help improve the health of Florida's watersheds now and for future generations.

1. Use Fertilizers and Pesticides Sparingly

A Florida-friendly landscape minimizes the need for fertilizer and pesticides. Applying more fertilizer than your yard can use allows excess nutrients to be transported by runoff. This may cause algal blooms and lower the oxygen levels in water bodies, disrupting the natural balance within the watershed. Toxins from pesticides may kill beneficial organisms within the watershed.

2. Conserve Water

Use Florida-friendly landscaping to save water. Overwatering can damage lawns and plants. In addition, excess water use stresses our water supply.

3. Have Septic Systems Inspected Regularly

Leaking septic systems may contaminate the water, making it harmful to plants, animals and people. Septic tanks should be inspected every two to three years and pumped as needed.

4. Never Dump Anything Down a Storm Drain

Storm drains help prevent flooding of streets and highways by quickly and efficiently transferring rainwater into nearby water bodies. Chemicals and other toxins dumped in storm drains find their way into lakes, rivers and streams, polluting the watershed.

5. Pick Up After Pets

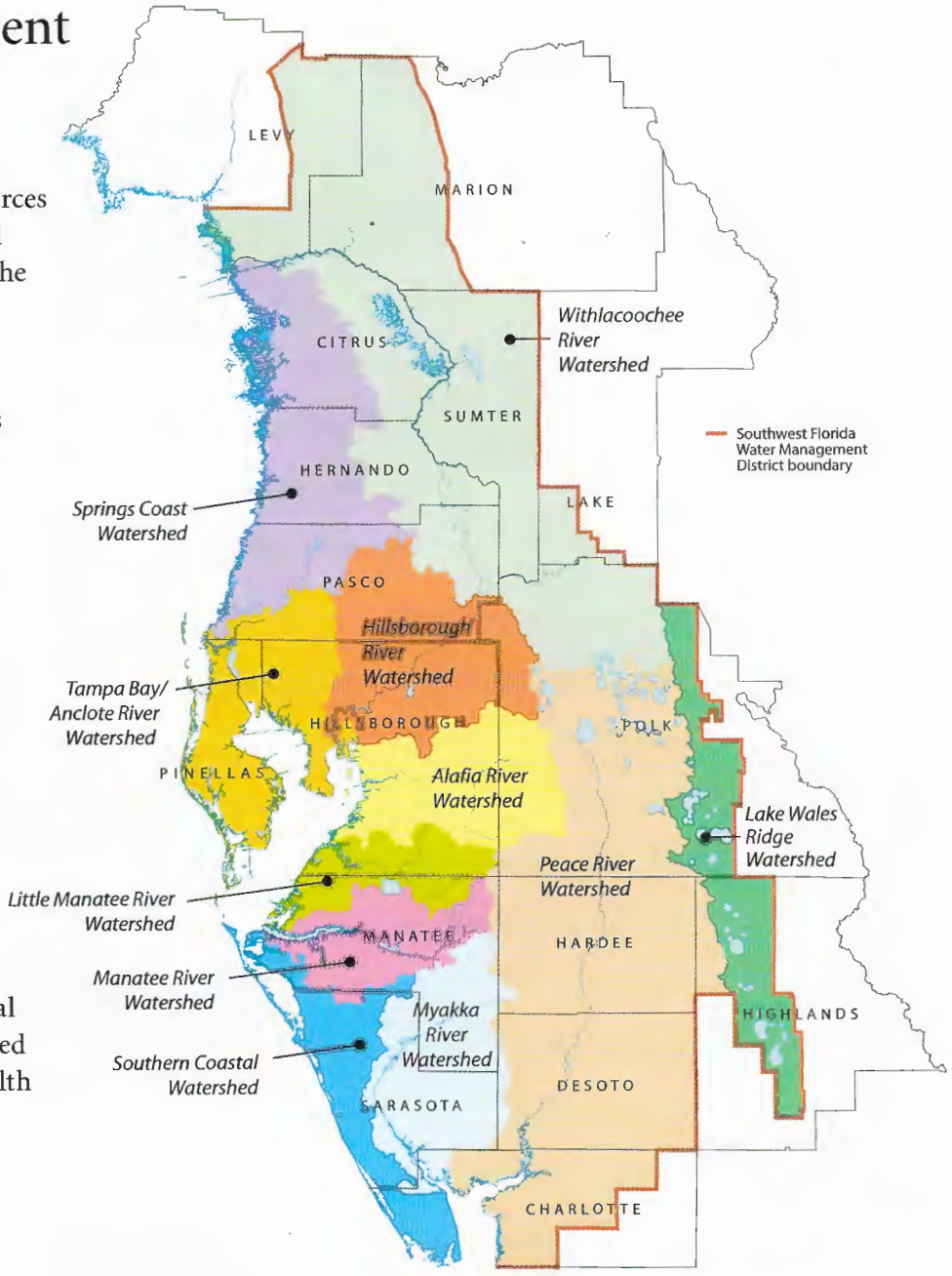
In high "pet traffic" areas near water bodies, bacteria from pet waste can be carried into water bodies, harming fish and other animals.

Watershed Management Program

The District's Watershed Management Program (WMP) manages water resources by evaluating how various systems and activities interconnect within each of the District's 11 major watersheds.

The WMP identifies, prioritizes and addresses water resource issues such as flood protection, water quality and habitat restoration projects within a watershed. The WMP has five stages: (1) collecting information such as land elevation, which affects how water moves within the watershed; (2) evaluating the information; (3) developing the plan to identify possible projects that will resolve water resource problems; (4) implementing the projects; (5) updating the information to make sure decisions are made based on the best available information.

The District and local, state and federal governments use information developed through the WMP to improve the health of the region's watersheds.



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