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The Mobile Bay Watershed is the sixth largest river basin in the United States, and drains waters from approximately three quarters of the state of Alabama, along with portions of Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi into Mobile bay. Mobile Bay is an estuary, or a transition zone where fresh water from streams and rivers meets and mixes with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico.

Estuaries, like Mobile Bay, deserve our attention for several reasons. First, healthy coastal systems provide shelter and food for plants and animals. Second, many of the commercial and recreational activities that we enjoy and depend on require coastal aquatic resources. Mobile Bay provides critical habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals. Additionally, over 90% of our local commercially and recreationally important species of fish and shellfish require estuaries at some point during their lives. Third, estuaries play a critical role in protecting us from the forces unleashed by tropical storms. Estuaries act as a natural buffer zone, preventing the worst hurricane impacts from affecting coastal urban areas.

Currently, the long-term health of Mobile Bay is in jeopardy, mainly due to the impacts of human activities that take place on land. These can be direct, such as the removal of coastal habitats to make way for development, or indirectly through the addition of pollution into our state's water bodies. It's important to recognize that both our activities along the coast and inland can pose a serious threat to Mobile Bay.

It is estimated that 75% of the U.S. population will live within 50 miles of the coast by the year 2010, and these coastal developments have placed added strain on estuaries all over the United States. Mobile Bay is not immune to these impacts. One of the main ways we threaten coastal habitats is through the addition of nutrients into our waterways. Nutrients occur naturally and are a necessary component of healthy aquatic systems; however, human activities can increase nutrients to a level that result in negative impacts to coastal habitat. These nutrients make their way into the water through storm water runoff from urban and agricultural areas, wastewater, and atmospheric pollution.

There are practical steps you can take to help minimize the amount of nutrients and other pollutants you may be contributing to coastal waters, and to ensure a healthy Mobile Bay for generations to come. One of the easiest and most practical measures is to limit the amount of fertilizers used on lawns and landscaping. Make sure to follow recommended schedules for fertilizers, and avoid fertilizing before expected heavy rains. Contact your local extension office for recommendations on what kind, how much, and when you should fertilize. Another step we can take is managing storm water runoff. Diverting runoff to retention ponds, rain gardens, or

rain barrels are ways to minimize the amount of nutrients that reach coastal waters. Finally, maintain your septic system. Repairing old or leaking septic systems, or replacing them with new and more efficient systems will help by keeping nutrients from reaching groundwater or running off.

For more information about the issues affecting Mobile Bay, visit the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program website at www.mobilebaynep.com