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Watersheds are everywhere: in the news, even on street signs. But what is a watershed and why is this concept important?

A watershed is an area of land that drains to one central waterbody, such as a creek, river, or bay. Watersheds are nested; for example, the Bon Secour River watershed flows into the larger Mobile Bay watershed, which is in turn part of the watershed of the Gulf of Mexico. Not only does water flow through the watershed; any pollutants, including soil, motor oils, pesticides and fertilizers, can be carried into a waterbody by stormwater, affecting the water quality.

So why worry about watersheds? Water quality not only affects our quality of life, but is a reflection of our land use. Increases in impervious surfaces (like roofs, parking lots, roads) decrease the amount of rainfall that can penetrate into the groundwater, which can affect groundwater supplies, and also, in turn, increase the amount of rainfall running directly into surface waters, which can increase flooding downstream.

The watershed concept is an important idea to consider when planning for growth. Many ideas can be incorporated into development that can reduce stormwater runoff; permeable pavements, for example, allow rainwater to soak back into the ground. A wide variety of permeable options exist, including grass pavers (used at the University of South Alabama's Mitchell Center and at Ladd-Peebles Stadium), brick pavers (used at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab Estuarium), and permeable concrete (used at the city of Fairhope Justice Center).

- Homeowners can also help reduce the amount of water running off of their property. Plant native vegetation that uses less water.
- Plant fewer areas of grass and encourage no-mow zones.

- Use permeable surfaces for patios, decks, and driveways.

For more information on watersheds and how you can decrease pollution from your own home, visit <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1215/> to read “The Citizen’s Guide to Nonpoint Source Pollution in Coastal Alabama”.