

Soil & Water Conservation Week 2018: “Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home”

By Anna Golightly, Madison County SWCD

This week, Iowa celebrates its 77th Soil & Water Conservation Week, and we join the rest of the country in celebrating nationally-recognized Soil and Water Stewardship Week. The theme for 2018 is “Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home”.

As the Badger Creek Lake Watershed Project Coordinator for the Madison County Soil & Water Conservation District, I can really appreciate this year’s watershed theme! However, I’ve learned that not everyone (children and adults) knows what they are (yet).

So, what is a watershed?

A watershed is the *area of land* where all of the water – both above and below ground – drains to a common body of water.

Watersheds are named after the common body of water that they drain to. Just pick a water body (from a small farm pond to a mighty river), and it will have a watershed. “Bob’s Pond” Watershed could be comprised of 40 acres that “shed” water off the landscape into the pond. On the other end of the spectrum, the Mississippi River Watershed drains 791,277,440 acres (or 1.2 million square miles).

Around here, you’re always in several watersheds at once; it’s just a matter of scale. Let’s say you’re in the Badger Creek Lake Watershed. If you were standing uphill of Bob’s farm pond, then you would be in the “Bob’s Pond” Watershed, a fraction of the landscape that drains into Badger Creek Lake, which is part of the larger Badger Creek Watershed. Badger Creek eventually flows into North River, so you’d also be in the North River Watershed, the Lake Red Rock Sub-basin, the Des Moines River Watershed, and on the largest scale you’d be in the Mississippi River Basin.

It’s similar to the levels of our communities... for example, let’s say I’m standing in the middle of the Badger Creek Lake Watershed; I’d be in a section in Jefferson Township, in Madison County, in the state of Iowa, in the Midwest, in the United States of America. There are things I would have in common with other people for each of those levels of place (and to avoid stereotypes, I’ll let you, the reader, fill in the blanks for what you think people in Jefferson Township, Madison County, Iowa, the Midwest, the USA, and so on might have in common!).

What about our home on the landscape? Where does your water shed?

Well, all of Iowa eventually drains to the Mississippi River; we’re part of the largest basin in the United States, and all of the water flows to the Gulf of Mexico. Does it matter? Shrimp fishermen in Louisiana surely think so, because the water flowing out of the Corn Belt is the biggest source of nutrients that create the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico (and in 2017, the Dead Zone was the largest ever measured; the size of New Jersey). Iowans think the Gulf of Mexico matters, too; we were the first of 12 states to develop a Nutrient Reduction Strategy to address Iowa’s contribution to the hypoxic zone.

A watershed is just another level of community. Our municipal communities include Winterset, Earlham, Patterson, Bevington, St. Charles, Truro, East Peru, and Macksburg. Our watershed communities include the North River, Middle River, South River, North Thompson (aka Grand) River, and

Raccoon River. Just like our municipal communities are made up of neighborhoods, streets, and individual plots, our river watersheds are made up of smaller creeks, drainageways, and hills. And just like the levels of communities that have things in common, all of the land in a watershed will have things in common too – similar topography, soils, land uses, and all of the water draining to the same place!

Stewardship in watersheds brings to mind the phrase: “Think globally, act locally”. It’s important to be aware of our connection to the Gulf of Mexico a thousand miles downstream (and places in between), but where conservation matters most is *at home*. Conservation needs to start on our farms, acreages, backyards, neighborhoods, and towns. Stewardship at the local level benefits us and our communities first! But the benefits don’t stop at the fenceline or city limits... our local waterbodies are the next thing to reap the benefits; then our neighbors downstream; and finally, and the end of the line, the Gulf of Mexico will benefit as well.

The trick for achieving all of these benefits is for the community to be working together. For the most part, the quality of our water becomes degraded when pollutants accumulate. For example, it’s not just one farm that is contributing sediment and phosphorus to Badger Creek Lake; the impairment is caused by the loss of soil throughout the entire 11,700 acre watershed. Just a few farmers can’t fix the impairment on their own ... it will take the whole watershed community working together to improve water quality. The impairment is the result of the accumulation of pollutants, therefore the solution will come from an accumulation of everyone focusing conservation at the home and farm level.

To learn more about your “home” watershed in Madison County, or about Soil & Water Conservation Week, follow us on Facebook @MadisonCountySWCD and visit our website: www.madison-swcd.org

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